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How Far to Push: an Interview with Designer Gideon Mendelson

WRITTEN BY MATT GURRY | © FEBRUARY 22, 2018 | [ART & DESIGN](#)



Gideon Mendelson talks about creating rooms that respect clients' needs and identity — but also push their boundaries.

“People come to me thinking they want a look,” Gideon Mendelson tells me over a table covered in luxe swatches. “But they must take a leap of faith, or I can’t do my job.”

Mendelson is the founder of the design firm Mendelson Group. Judging by his portfolio, it seems his clients would put their faith in him easily. But, he reminds me, these are people’s homes, which they see as expressions of themselves; it’s only natural that they should be guarded.

Mendelson says that part of his job — which includes titles such as interior architect, interior designer and custom-furniture designer —

is to push his clients a little.

“Push?” I ask.

“A little bit,” he answers.

Mendelson says each client comes with his own hang-ups — about color, pattern, texture, newness, often all of the above. Though part of Mendelson’s job is to see a space’s potential, another part is to make clients see it too. That’s where he needs to push.

When a client looks at the polished portfolios of architects and designers, it's easy to picture himself in these finished spaces. But a client can easily become nervous about any of the multitude of choices that occur as the space evolves. And that's why it's so important for him to win a client's trust.

At the Mendelson Group, this trust-building process begins before a client even walks in their door. Their studio enjoys a level of zen that is shocking, given the high-profile projects and clients they take on.

When the client arrives, the next stage begins: listening. Mendelson wants to know who a client is and how he lives. Many clients don't directly address design in this chat (many don't think they can), so he translates these concepts from conversation about other tastes. Film, clothes, travel: that sort of thing.

Mendelson also respects the problem-solving aspect of his job. What does a space need to be? Does it need to accommodate kids? Cocktail parties? Both?

Mendelson and his partner have three young kids, so he knows well — very well — the importance of addressing a room's practical needs. Yet a designer's home needs to look "designed." He points to his own home in the Hamptons as an example.

As it is meant to be part of his portfolio, the room has of course been styled just-so. Yet it remains inviting — that much is easy to see. (And speaking of easy-to-see, I was shocked to learn that the seemingly sun-drenched room pictured was shot on a gray, rainy day.)

Mendelson describes the space as "intellectually challenging," which initially strikes me as off. To me, it seemed like a cohesive space, in which everything goes together quite naturally. But when he breaks it down, item by item, one understands how the pieces, when viewed separately, might seem a motley crew.

This armchair is 1800s Belgian. That end table is 1950s Italian. Yet the room they're in is distinctly Hamptons 2014. The objects, despite their dissimilar origins, are in conversation with one another — along with the sofa on the

opposite wall and the off-center artwork it sits under. Even the little monkey on the hearth seems like it climbed down from the branches in the mirror sculpture above the mantel.

When you look at pictures like those in the Mendelson Group's portfolio (mendelsongroupinc.com), you may think you're responding to each room as a whole. But the impact is built from a journey involving many complex choices. That's why you want a designer who can choose what will make a room feel right for you — but knows just how far to push.

