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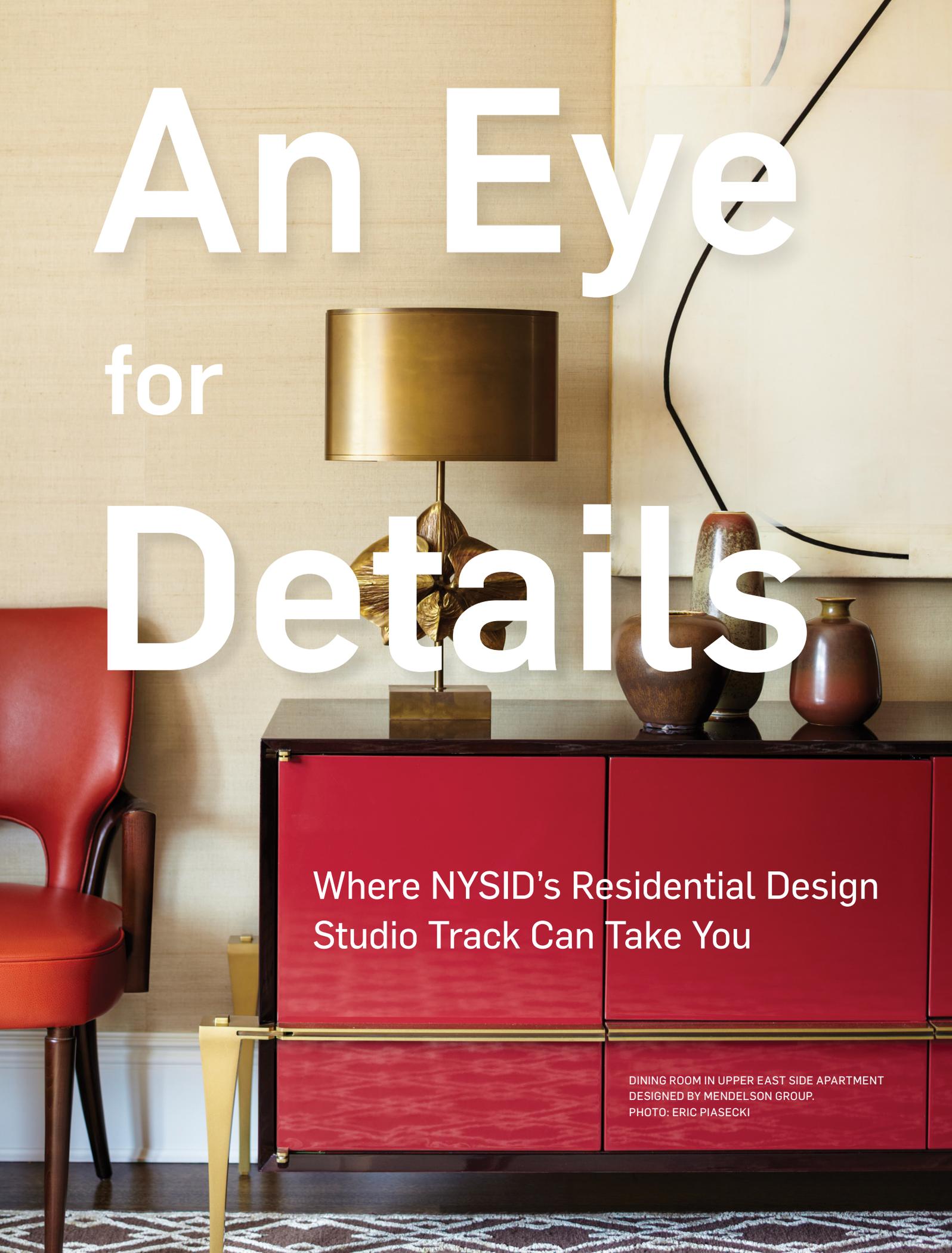
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New York School of Interior Design

Driven by Design

As our MFA-1 Program Turns 10, Gensler's Topaz Wong '16 and Other Alumni Share the Stories Behind Their Thriving Careers





An Eye

for

Details

Where NYSID's Residential Design
Studio Track Can Take You

DINING ROOM IN UPPER EAST SIDE APARTMENT
DESIGNED BY MENDELSON GROUP.
PHOTO: ERIC PIASECKI

Fifty percent of NYSID's BFA studios are devoted to residential design. **Gideon Mendelson '07 (AAS)**, founder of Mendelson Group, and **Brooke Lichtenstein '10 (BFA)** and **Yiannos Vrousgos '10 (BFA)**, co-principals of Input Creative Studio, talk about the foundation in residential design that got them where they are today.

When we caught up with NYSID alumnus Gideon Mendelson, creative director and principal of Mendelson Group, he was supervising his team of seven as they worked on two homes in Scarsdale, a townhouse and duplex on the Upper East Side, a new build in New Jersey, an Upper West Side apartment, an estate in Mamaroneck, and a beachfront property on the North Fork of Long Island. Yet, he didn't seem a bit stressed. "I'm a pretty laid-back character," he said, "because I love my job, and I look to surround myself with confident, autonomous professionals who are committed to the idea of what design can do." Mendelson received a BA in Architecture and Film from Columbia, and originally entered business development in the entertainment industry, before pursuing his associate's degree at NYSID, one class at a time. Though his mother was an interior designer and he was fascinated by her sketches as a child, it wasn't until he was out in the real world, working, that he realized residential interior design was also his calling. At NYSID, he was impacted by his course in color theory, and emboldened by faculty members who gave him the confidence to pull the elements of a project together in a studio environment. He started working at an interior design firm while studying at NYSID, and later founded Mendelson Group in 2003, establishing a reputation for offering a cool-headed, organized approach to residential design that prioritizes the needs of clients and the function of space.

Mendelson, whose work has been featured everywhere from *Traditional Home* to *House Beautiful*, says, "I don't start with the style of a room. The emphasis on merchandise in interior design has overpowered what is really important: our experience, how we interact with each other, our relationships. Of course it has to be great looking, but that's not as important as how it works. I went into residential interior design because I'm interested in how people live, the sociology of space."

Perhaps the reason NYSID is known for turning out so many successful residential entrepreneurs, such as designers like Mendelson, is not only due to the institutional respect the College has for residential design, but also the emphasis the College places on teaching students to observe the intimate details of how space is used. Ellen Fisher, NYSID's Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean says, "The way NYSID breaks out residential design into distinct studios in



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GIDEON MENDELSON '07 (AAS)

the BFA program is unusual. We think that if your design work is to be centered on people, there's nothing like starting where they live, eat, play, and sleep. The most fundamental aspects of human life happen in homes. Designers ought to know all of the things that make people feel healthy, happy and safe at home, and from there you can extrapolate to more public spaces." ►

Faculty on the Residential Studios They Teach

NYSID requires BFA students to take three residential design studios during the course of the degree, which are interspersed with three contract design studios, and culminate in the final thesis. (In the AAS, students take two residential design studios and one contract studio.) Each studio is taught by a practicing interior designer, whose unique professional history helps color the experience.

Holly Hayden '09 (BFA), an interior designer with the residential firm Jeremiah Brent Design, is one of the faculty members who teaches the Residential Design I studio at NYSID. As a student, she wanted to go into residential design, but she graduated at the end of the last economic downturn in 2009 and was hired by Gensler to work on commercial projects, especially the restacking of office buildings (the consolidation of multiple

floors into fewer floors). She says, "I cut my teeth in commercial design at the precise moment when office pantries went from being grey, peripheral spaces to beautiful, shared ones. Companies were hiring employees with lower billing rates, and both design firms and their clients wanted younger workers, and needed amenities and comforts to entice employees to come work for them and perhaps to even work longer hours, so I drew on what I learned from doing residential design. It's the most relatable part of design. I think it's a huge step to grasp residential first." Hayden brings her diverse experience to her teaching, challenging students to think about the changing culture of work and to envision homes that increasingly encompass offices. She says, "Residential Design I is the first interiors studio that students experience in the BFA, and the amount of focus it takes always surprises them. My students start with choosing the

historical style of the room and then they design all the details. There's a moment in every semester when I look at my students and say, 'Well, what about the ceiling?' It then occurs to them they have to think about more than just the walls and furniture. The students are in control of the whole design process. This freedom is the most daunting and wonderful thing about interior design."

Shannon M. Leddy is a residential designer with decades of experience who teaches Residential Design II. As a vast majority of Leddy's clients are 65 years old or older and concerned with aging in place, she challenges her students to get inside the experience of what it's like to live with physical limitations. "The first project we do in Residential Design II is the Wounded Warrior Home project, in which my students have to design a single-level house for the entire family of a veteran wounded in battle, which might



FINAL CRITIQUE IN HOLLY HAYDEN'S RESIDENTIAL DESIGN I STUDIO. HAYDEN IS ON FAR RIGHT.



also include another person with a disability or an aging family member. We introduce ADA standards and universal design. I ask my students to get in a wheelchair, move about, and to try using it in the bathroom. We visit companies like Häfele and Hewi and the students try on an ergonomic suit that gives them the experience of what it's like for elderly people to move around. The suit simulates aging conditions, such as the way the grip changes when you have arthritis, and it entirely changes the way my students look at hardware and accessibility."

The second project in Residential Design II is based on Andy Warhol's home and studio, built in a former Upper East Side firehouse. The premise of the project is that a famous artist has purchased this firehouse to support refugee artists. This rotating cast of visiting artists will share the space with the artist/owner, so the building must be converted into a shared living space with additional bedrooms and a studio as well as a gallery space. Says Leddy, "This is an adaptive re-use project, in which students have to study the history of a building and decide what to

preserve or recall, even down to details like the firepole. They have to research and select their artists, which broadens their knowledge of international artists. They have to design a co-housing space." Adds Leddy, "Everything I teach is an exploration of the way different people live in their homes, an opportunity for students to think outside their own experience."

NYSID's Residential Design III studio, taught by René Estacio, an interior designer, architect, master furniture designer and another alumnus of NYSID, challenges students to design a four-story residence that will serve as both a home for a cultural attaché and his family (on the top two floors) and a cultural institute (on the bottom two floors). In response to an industry that increasingly values flexible designers proficient at many types of design, NYSID has structured this course as a bridge between residential and contract design, which inspires students to apply the decorative detail of residential design to grand public spaces. Says Estacio, "The students start with floor plans and a schematic design. They complete two research projects: an examination of the culture of the country the attaché is from; and an observation of a real cultural institute here in New York. Within their plans, they have to design a gallery and a ballroom, and even create a landscape design for the gardens at the back. This intensive course sets students up for their final thesis." Estacio, who has also worked for the Saladino Furniture Company and was design director for the McGuire and Baker Furniture Companies, inspires his students to look at the craftsmanship and ergonomics behind every object they choose.

NYSID studios layer challenges to give students the ultimate exposure to the possibilities they might encounter in the working world. ▶

Taking the Residential Lens into Commercial Projects

Alumni Brooke Lichtenstein '10 (BFA) and Yiannos Vrousos '10 (BFA), principals of Input Creative Studio, founded their firm together while they were still undergraduates at NYSID. The business partners have since become life partners, marrying and welcoming their first child into the world. Lichtenstein recalls, "In our first three years as a company, we designed residential apartments, restaurants and retail spaces for Fortune 500 companies. We took whatever projects we could to establish our business."

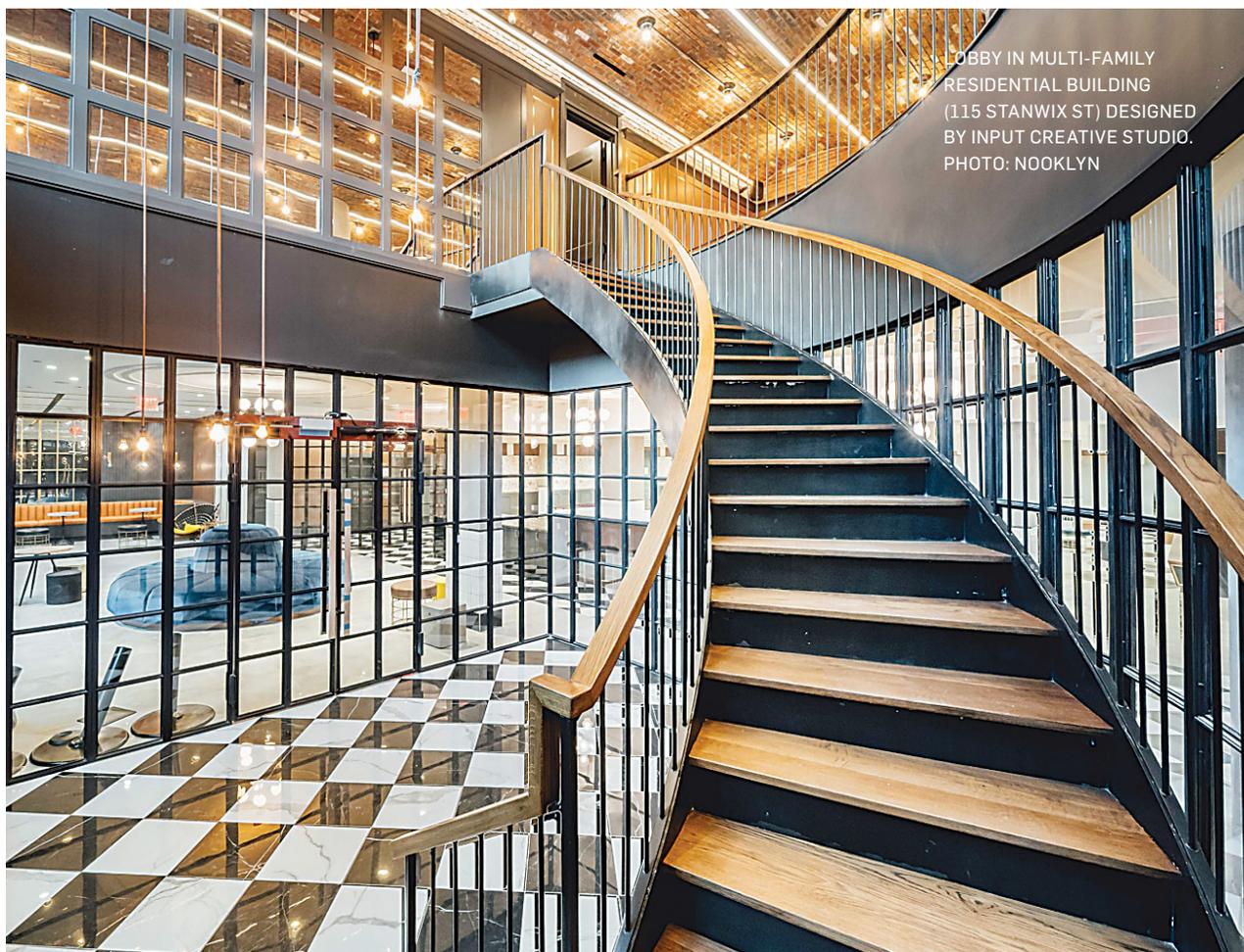
The pair found that their residential design education and experience served them well as they expanded to larger contract projects. Vrousos says, "When you have a strong foundation

in residential design, you develop a sensitivity to approaching large-scale projects on a human scale." Adds Lichtenstein, "The residential approach trains you to create smaller, more intimate, curated spaces within the commercial landscape." Her point is that the decorative arts matter, even in contract work.

Input Creative Studio now has a growing staff of designers and a diverse portfolio of clients. The company has carved out a specialty in residential development, specifically a new breed of luxury apartment buildings in which the public spaces are as important as the private residences. Input Creative Studio's task is to make a whole building feel like a home, and to design spaces that build engagement and community among residents, such as

through co-working spaces, movie theaters, roof gardens, lounges and play spaces. Says Lichtenstein, whose team recently completed the design of 115 Stanwix Street in Brooklyn, "Our job is to wow users with the experience of the whole building."

Both designers say the 50/50 balance of contract and residential studio experience they encountered at NYSID, and their experience in making public spaces feel intimate, set them up to being the adaptive entrepreneurs they are today. Lichtenstein's advice to aspiring designers is, "You never know where the economic winds will take you, so you have to treat all work, even pro bono work, as a valuable opportunity." ■



LOBBY IN MULTI-FAMILY RESIDENTIAL BUILDING (115 STANWIX ST) DESIGNED BY INPUT CREATIVE STUDIO. PHOTO: NOOKLYN



ROOM IN SAGAPONACK, NY
WEEKEND HOUSE DESIGNED
BY MENDELSON GROUP.
PHOTO: ERIC PIASECKI

GIDEON MENDELSON'S ADVICE FOR ASPIRING INTERIOR DESIGN ENTREPRENEURS

NYSID alumnus Gideon Mendelson '07 (AAS), the creative director and principal of Mendelson Group, says, "If you want to be really successful in interior design, there are two ways to do it: start your own company or go and work for a huge firm." Mendelson believes aspiring designers need to think more about the entrepreneurial side of the business. He surveyed his own team to see what designers spend time on and discovered only 8% of his firm's time is spent on actual design; the rest is spent on marketing, client services, project management, sales, business development and construction documents. His three best pieces of advice for aspiring residential designers are:

1

Cultivate a Hobby That Gets You Next to Potential Clients

Mendelson notes that interior design is about relationships, so cultivate hobbies that put you in the same orbit as potential clients. For him, that hobby was tennis, and it connected him to individuals who became his early clients. However, your interest in the organization or club you join should be genuine.

2

Understand How Much of the Business is Project Management

He says, "Designers need to know what it means to be a full service firm. Managing a project from start to finish with extreme attention to detail is a big part of the service we provide clients."

3

Surround Yourself with a Team Who Can Execute Your Vision

From stonemasons to electricians to upholsterers, your virtual Rolodex of reliable sources and service providers are a big part of what you offer. You have to make it seamless for clients.