



Living Room Couture

BY DREW LIMSKY

For today's interior designers, curating pieces from showrooms is only half the job. It is custom-creating pieces that defines a project—and satisfies a discerning client.

"It was a great experience that led us to incorporate more and more custom into projects," he says. "Our motto became: If we can't find it we will make it!" These days, an interior designer who isn't adept at creating pieces is a designer who doesn't succeed. As Stake notes, "It's so important to have a mix of things in a project—new pieces from showrooms, vintage items from our resources around the world, as well as custom. They all have their place and strong suits. New items offer availability, vintage brings in soul—and custom allows us to introduce great craftsmanship personalized to each client's space."

"One of the first things I designed for a client was a floating vanity with a TV hidden behind the full-width mirror," recalls Miami-based interior designer Mike Stake. "This was before mirrors were readily available with this feature, but the client really wanted to watch the news as he was getting ready and there was no other place for a TV. So we made it happen."

Says Michael Scigliano, principal of MS2 Design Studio, "Often I look at the space and the client's needs and immediately know they require custom." For a client's home in Miami Beach, a storage piece needed to have

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PRINCIPAL ARCHITECT OF EOLO DESIGNS

clothing and shoe storage, display space, hampers, a king-size bed, and nightstands—and serve as a room divider. "Lots of criteria for one custom piece," Scigliano says. What resulted was a formidable piece crafted from rift cut oak, bronze mirrors and bronze glass, LED illumination, blackened steel, leather, and a Dekton top.

Some designers are given to customizing a specific piece or two for virtually all their clients. Creating specialized floating vanities is Stake's specialty. For Jay Britto of Britto Charette, those favored pieces are beds and nightstands. "I design the beds and nightstands for almost every single project," he says. "Some companies don't do specific sizes of furniture, so it's easier to create pieces geared to the client. Some clients want a nightstand for books, or a pull-out tray, or a surface to display art."

In the Portofino Tower in Miami Beach, Britto was working with sophisticated Italian clients with midcentury tastes, so the firm custom-designed the bed and the wood and white lacquer nightstands to reflect a sleek 1960s Italian aesthetic. Since the unit had an unusual floorplan with pie-wedge-like areas, Britto got resourceful: he had an idea for an elliptical oak desk to fit inside a niche



COURTESY OF SANDRA DIAZ-VELASCO



PHOTO BY ALEXIA FODERE COURTESY OF ODALYS HERNANDEZ

that he'd transformed from an angular space to a softer, round one. Executing customized pieces for years eventually led Britto Charette to produce its own limited-edition furniture.

Brown Davis Interiors experienced a similar evolution. "We've always custom-designed sofas, lounge chairs, and sectionals," says principal Todd Davis. "We are very specific about the dimensions, height of seat, depth of back pitch, and firmness of cushions, and we've never found showroom stock furnishings to allow the flexibility and customization our designs and clients demand." In the '90s the firm connected with furniture designer Keith Fritz and

commissioned him to build two custom dining tables for Bill and Hillary Clinton. "Flash forward to four years ago," Davis says, "and we joined forces with Keith to officially launch our own product line of wood tables and other pieces: Brown Davis Exclusively for Keith Fritz."

When the designer is also an architect, like Sandra Diaz-Velasco, principal architect of EOLO Designs, custom work extends far beyond furniture. She is particularly proud of a project in Cocoplum, in Coral Gables, that won a slew of awards, including the International IDA and the ASID design excellence award. To give the master bath a sense of arrival and discovery, she covered

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PHOTO BY KRIS TAMBURELLO, COURTESY OF TODD DAVIS, BROWN DAVIS INTERIORS

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a vaulted hallway with luscious wood paneling; thus, the freestanding bathtub is framed like a piece of functional art. “I wanted the owners to feel this path and begin disconnecting from their extremely busy lives when entering the space,” says Diaz-Velasco. If the essence of custom design is to deliver a space both singular and proprietary, this architectural moment epitomizes it.

For a recent project by Miami designer Odalys Hernandez of House of Odalys, custom work was required to maximize space in an 1,100-square-foot condo in Brickell. For the living room, she created a blue lacquered built-in wall unit accented with oak; the 10-foot-long piece features striking brass hardware from Nest Casa and nods to the opposite blue-paneled wall, also custom.

The bedroom, too, is anchored by an ambitious built-in piece—mirrored, with an oak veneer—but Hernandez’s custom work for this client went beyond storage. The bedroom also boasts a brass-edged velvet headboard, crafted in Italy by Miami-based MORADA-Haute Furniture Boutique. The bed is supported by an acrylic base to lend it a floating feeling. “The client was very specific—she wanted it to be tufted and tall,” Hernandez says. “When it was done, she landed and went straight to the apartment, and her first text would get.”

Hernandez’s collaborator, MORADA-Haute Furniture Boutique, which is much sought after for its glam aesthetic, directly customizes its own pieces, too. “We can modify any of our standard items to the client’s needs or even develop a new design based on a client’s or specific project needs,” says principal Holger Odenstein Hernandez. His partner Fernan Hernandez Odenstein adds: “This is the essence of haute couture furniture.”

An especially aesthetic-minded client may be able to skip the designer all together. Author Hal Rubenstein, the peerless New York style arbiter who served as fashion director of InStyle magazine and men’s style editor of The New York Times Magazine, among other key editorial roles, knew exactly what he needed to light his dining room. And he knew it didn’t already exist. Rubenstein envisioned a chandelier that wouldn’t be dwarfed by a 23-foot-high gabled roof. Sounds reasonable. Couldn’t he just source that from a showroom?

Well, no. “We wanted the chandelier to be inspired by the crown Peter O’Toole wears in the movie version of The Lion in Winter,” he explains. So Rubenstein tapped a frequent collaborator, the ironsmith Joseph Stannard, to deliver such precision. “Our dining room chandelier,” Rubenstein says, “is a knockout.”