

IT'S NOT LONELY AT THE TOP

From whom do the masters learn? Explore how a dozen of New York's top designers and architects have been drawing support and knowledge from their own Designers' Collaborative for a decade

When you climb to the top of your profession, from whom do you learn? When you've "made it," where do you go to seek support and advice? One answer to these questions lies with a dozen master designers in New York City who opted a decade ago to establish the Designers' Collaborative, an informal support group that meets regularly to share information and exchange ideas on design process, paperwork, procedures and products.

It's not just any support group, because this band of 12 happens to include some of the best-known luminaries in design and architecture that there are: Susan Huckvale Arann, CID, ASID, Bruce Bierman, Laura Bohn, Ronald Bricke, R. Scott Bromley, Tim Button, Clodagh, Celeste Cooper, Carl D'Aquino, ASID, Amy Flom, Glenn Gissler, and



Laura Bohn established Laura Bohn Design Associates in 1980. In addition to architectural and interior design projects, the company has designed furniture, fabrics, and wallcoverings. Laura's fabric and wallpaper collections have garnered two Roscoe awards, and she is in the process of developing a tabletop collection. Laura, a graduate of Pratt Institute, is an Advisory Board member at Parsons School of Design and the Fashion Institute of Technology. She has been inducted into the Interior Design Hall of Fame.





After studying Architecture at McGill University, R. Scott Bromley, AIA, "bumped into Philip Johnson, miraculously landed a job and then designed a little club called Studio 54 on the side," he says. Jerry Caldari, AIA, studied architecture at Clemson University. Though he first worked for Scott Bromley in 1979, it wasn't until 1991 that the Bromley Caldari partnership was formed. And the rest is history. At right: Jerry Caldari (left) and R. Scott Bromley (right).



Tim Button studied Environmental Design at Parson's School of Design. For the past 25 years, he has been a partner in Stedila Design, an interior design firm founded by John Stedila in the early 1970's. Currently, Tim is working on two "green" buildings in Manhattan's Battery Park City: the Solaire luxury high-rise, awarded a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Gold Award, and the Verdesian, its sister building.



Glenn Gissler is the President and sole proprietor of Glenn Gissler Design, Inc., a Manhattan-based design firm established in 1987. After graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design with degrees in Fine Arts and Architecture, he worked for interior designer Juan Montoya and later for internationally acclaimed architect Rafael Vinoly. In many of the larger residential projects his firm handles today, he assists clients in the selection of the design and architecture team, as well as participates in the schematic design of the structure and specifications of furnishings.

Carl F. D'Aquino, ASID, graduated from the Architecture School of the City University of New York and began working as an architectural designer for a handful of respected architects and designers. He and partner, Francine Monaco, RA, founded the firm D'Aquino Monaco in 1980. Examples of their work can be viewed at www.daquinomonaco.com.

Barry Goralnick. Their photos, brief biographical details and, in many cases, examples of their work illustrate this article.

They allowed *Designer* magazine in to observe a regular meeting and do what magazine editors do: ask questions. In the hope that how the Designers' Collaborative operates may inspire you to seek a similar arrangement in your hometown, here are invaluable insights from the gang of 12.

Q: HOW DID THE DESIGNERS' COLLABORATIVE BEGIN?

"Laura Bohn and I independently of each other attended a presentation given by a referral service," says Bruce. "The presentation wasn't very good, so Laura and I walked out at the same time and talked in the elevator about design firms, the issues involved and concluded that we should meet."

This wasn't the first time a learning and support group had formed among top New York designers. There had been a precedent set. "Before our group," Bruce says, "there was another group begun years before that included designers Bebe Winkler, Tom O'Toole and several others."

Today, the Designers' Collaborative has a dozen members. At one point in its decade-long history, however, there were as many as 34 members, but that number proved to be too unwieldy. "People





Susan Huckvale Arann, ASID, CID, is owner of Staten Island-based American & International Designs, Inc. and past President of the American Society of Interior Designers New York Metropolitan Chapter. She is a color forecaster, member of the Color Marketing Group, and an authority in the use of window treatments. She attended Parsons and the New York School of Design, and owned a successful fashion boutique prior to entering the interior design field.



Clodagh began her career in the fashion industry, starting her own company at age 17. She later transitioned into architectural design, opening a studio and showroom. Today, Clodagh Design employs more than 25 designers, architects and cross-discipline professionals. Clodagh Signature is the company's licensing and product design division. The Clodagh Collection Showroom is a gallery and retail showroom. Clodagh has been inducted into the *Interior Design Hall of Fame*.

didn't show up, so we established dues that go toward purchasing refreshments—food and drink—at each meeting," Bruce says.

Q: WHAT IS THE FORMAT OF THE MEETING?

"It began as a two-hour meeting ten years ago," Bruce continues. "One of the options was to invite someone in to talk about a subject in the first hour and then we'd use the second hour for show and tell. We'd bring in new materials or products that we had learned about."

Each member takes a turn for one year being the organizer of the group—sending out e-mails notifying members about the location, reminding them about topics and any materials they need to bring, and moderating the meeting to keep discussions moving along. This year's organizer is R. Scott Bromley.

"We meet every six weeks and there is an agenda," says Scott.

Q: HOW DO YOU ALL DEAL WITH THE ISSUE OF COMPETITIVENESS?

"We help and support each other," says Bruce. "Today, Clodagh e-mailed a question she had about a source and before I could respond, I noted that five or six others from the group had already answered her."

"Each of our styles is different and we admittedly steal ideas from each other and then apply them in our own way," says Celeste. Bruce's sock drawer, for example, outfitted with elements to organize socks by color is one of those fun ideas that made the rounds.

The group early on in its history made a commitment to honest sharing. The atmosphere

of candidness and trust among group members allows them to discuss everything, from contracts and fees to how to deal with various client types. They even recommend each other for projects they hear of that may not be right for themselves.

"Laura Bohn was being interviewed by a client for a job," Bruce says. "She called me, told me about the project and said, 'It's not my client, it's yours.'"

Competitors helping each other get projects? The reality is that group members don't view each other as competitors.

Clodagh says, "If you put the same ingredients in front of five chefs, you'll get 50 different dishes." Each designer takes and applies the information they share in his or her own way. "We all know each other's work and style," says Scott.

What also makes the group gel is the fact that they are all experienced pros who believe that there is enough work to go around for everyone. "We are all at the same place in our careers," says Celeste. "We are seasoned. And a security exists in who we are. We are all principals of our own established firms. None of us is scrambling to meet a bottom line."

"One time in a discussion about fees, we made up an imaginary project that we each created estimates for. We proposed the imaginary project because designers charge differently, so one project created a level playing field," Bruce explains. "It was amazing that all of us came within 10 percent of what the other estimated. That showed we were all on the same wavelength."

Q: WHY DON'T YOU JUST NETWORK AT ASSOCIATION MEETINGS?

"You don't get the degree of honesty in that type of group that we have here," says Scott. "We know



Barry Goralnick received his Master of Architecture degree from Harvard University Graduate School of Design, and after apprenticing in Boston and Chicago, worked for Wayne Berg Architect and Robert A.M. Stern Architects in New York. Barry Goralnick Architects was founded in 1985. He is a member of the AIA, NYAIA and NCARB, and also designs a furniture and lighting collection distributed by Profiles in New York.

each other very well and have been helping each other for a long time. And we really like each other. If you have good relationships with peers, you have the best times!"

"When I was starting out in the field, I tore out of design magazines every single thing Scott ever did because I admired him so much. When I was asked to join this group that Scott is part of, I knew I had arrived," Celeste says. It's genuine admiration and respect for each other that forms the glue that keeps this group tight knit. And,

sometimes, perhaps a bit too tight knit.

Bruce notes that their closeness and honed familiarity with each other have several times prevented an added member or two from sticking with the group. "They would attend a meeting or two and then drop out," he says. "They probably felt like outsiders because we know each other so well and they didn't know us yet."

LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS

As long as you have top designers in one room, the temptation to solicit insights about design from them can't be resisted.

Q: WHAT HAS BEEN THE KEY TO YOUR SUCCESS?

"Confidence," says Susan.

"Hard work, talent, luck and passion for what we

do," says Scott.

"Obsession," according to Laura.

"Creating good relationships," Barry says.

"What some call 'talent' is openness to what comes in visually and intellectually," Celeste explains. "You have to be a sponge. I was at the Art Basel show in Miami looking for art for my clients, but also designing coverlets and rugs in my head inspired by all the varied, exciting artworks I saw. You have to find that place in your mind where it's unobstructed—open."

Q: WHAT RECENT CHANGES HAVE YOU SEEN IN DESIGN?

Susan and Barry concur one change is increased consumer awareness about design.

Celeste expands on that thought, "The client is more exposed to DIY on HGTV—horrendous stuff! The designers on TV are far less educated in a classical sense. It's the Philistining of America. As much as 'design' is in the forefront, design is being denigrated."

"The McMansions of the world have received perhaps too much exposure," says Laura. Proving, according to Glenn that, indeed, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing."



Q: WHAT CHANGES HAVE YOU NOTED IN THE K&B FIELD?

"The kitchen is the new living room even in studio apartments," says Celeste. "We're designing daybeds into the kitchen."

"And bathrooms are the new spas," says Laura.

"I'm not so sure of those trends," says Bruce.

"Different people have different lifestyles. It's about people acknowledging time management and how they spend the time in their lives.

"For example, some clients have had kitchens designed for themselves that accommodate 18 people for dinner and they wind up never entertaining, or entertaining once a year. Now they are at the stage where they are examining their lives and saying to themselves, 'I had that large kitchen 20 years ago, I'm not going to use it and I want something else,'" Bruce says. "It's about

Bruce Bierman trained in Architecture as well as Fine Arts at the Rhode Island School of Design. In his work, Bruce combines practical knowledge with a refined aesthetic. He founded Bruce Bierman Design in 1977 and currently has a staff of 20. He has been inducted into the *Interior Design* Hall of Fame.



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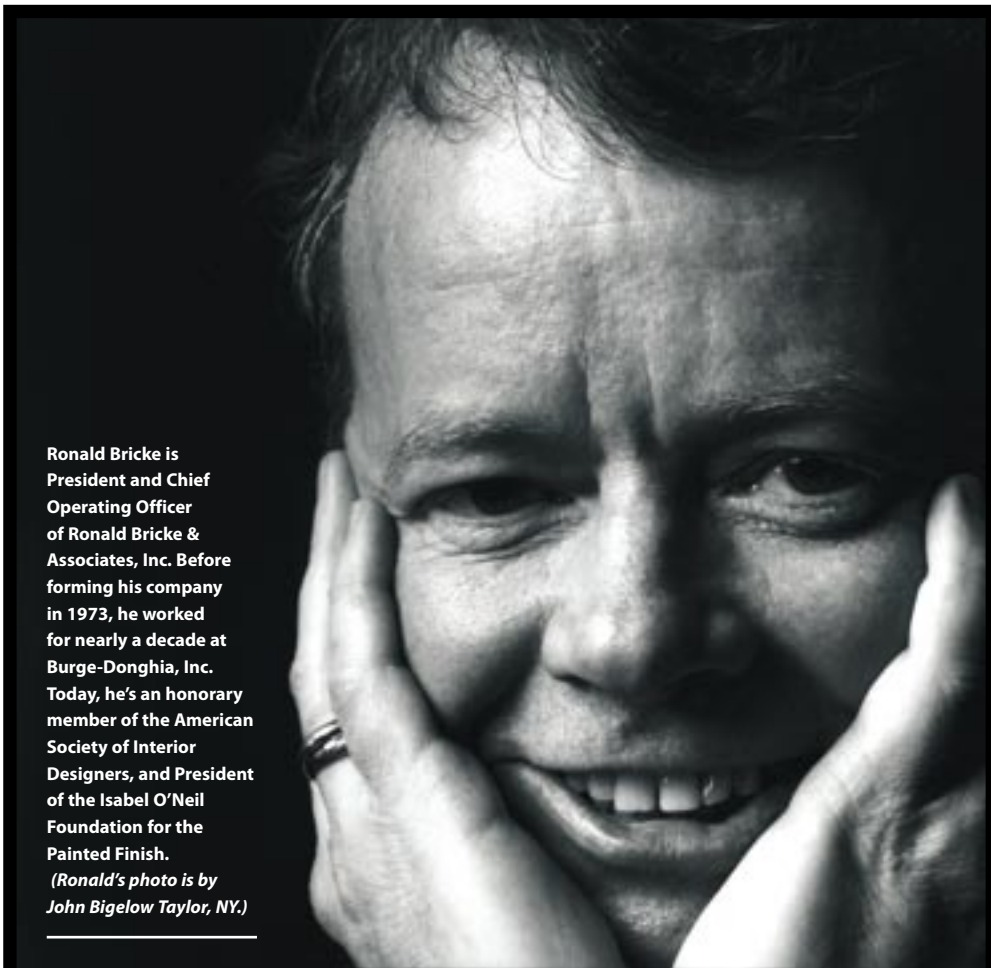
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Formerly the Creative Director of Repertoire, Boston/NY, Celeste Cooper is now a Design Consultant for The Orpin Group and also works with the firm 1100 Architect, New York. She is an inductee to the *Interior Design Hall of Fame*. Examples of The Orpin Group's work can be viewed at www.theorpingroup.com. (Photo by Michael McDermit)



Amy Flom is a principal in Schecter Flom, a New York architectural design practice established in 1991 by Amy Flom and Jonathan Schecter. Both studied Architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design. Their work includes restaurants, hotels, offices and residential commissions.



Ronald Bricke is President and Chief Operating Officer of Ronald Bricke & Associates, Inc. Before forming his company in 1973, he worked for nearly a decade at Burge-Donghia, Inc. Today, he's an honorary member of the American Society of Interior Designers, and President of the Isabel O'Neil Foundation for the Painted Finish. (Ronald's photo is by John Bigelow Taylor, NY.)

personalizing spaces."

"I find the largeness of houses and rooms can lead to a kind of repetition of materials. How many places can you sit in one room?" Barry asks.

"Some clients should be given hats that say, 'Protect me from what I want,'" jokes Glenn.

"No one uses the high-end kitchens we design," says Laura.

"When was the last enclosed kitchen?" Scott asks.

"I designed two kitchens into one home," Bruce answers. "One kitchen was in with the family room. The other was for the housekeeper so she could make food for the kids and that was closed off so the main kitchen wouldn't look messy. Kitchens today are full kitchen/family rooms where everyone hangs out."

And so the discussions and easy exchanges among colleagues, among friends, among top achievers in the field continue. **D**



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