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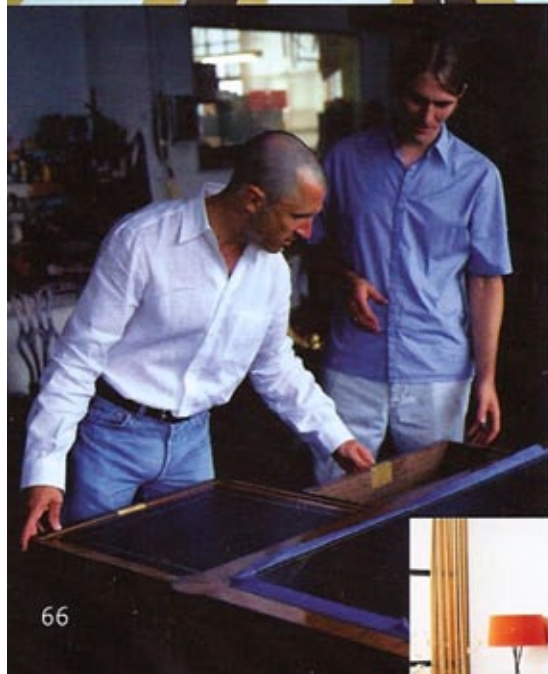
ELEMENTS OF LIVING

RESOURCES FOR RESIDENTIAL DESIGN

CUSTOM

Design Gets Personal

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GETTING THE PERFECT CUSTOM SOFA
TALKING TO TONY INGRAO
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On the Cover UPHOLSTERED CHAIR BY GEORGE SMITH, NEW YORK, NY. SEE P. 51. PHOTOGRAPH BY THOMAS HART SHELBY.



the handmade tale

Designer Darren Henault takes **EOL** on a behind-the-scenes tour of four top custom workrooms in New York City,

where great artisans show how fine craftsmanship casts an unmistakable aura of quality over a finished piece.

Written and photographed
by Donna Paul

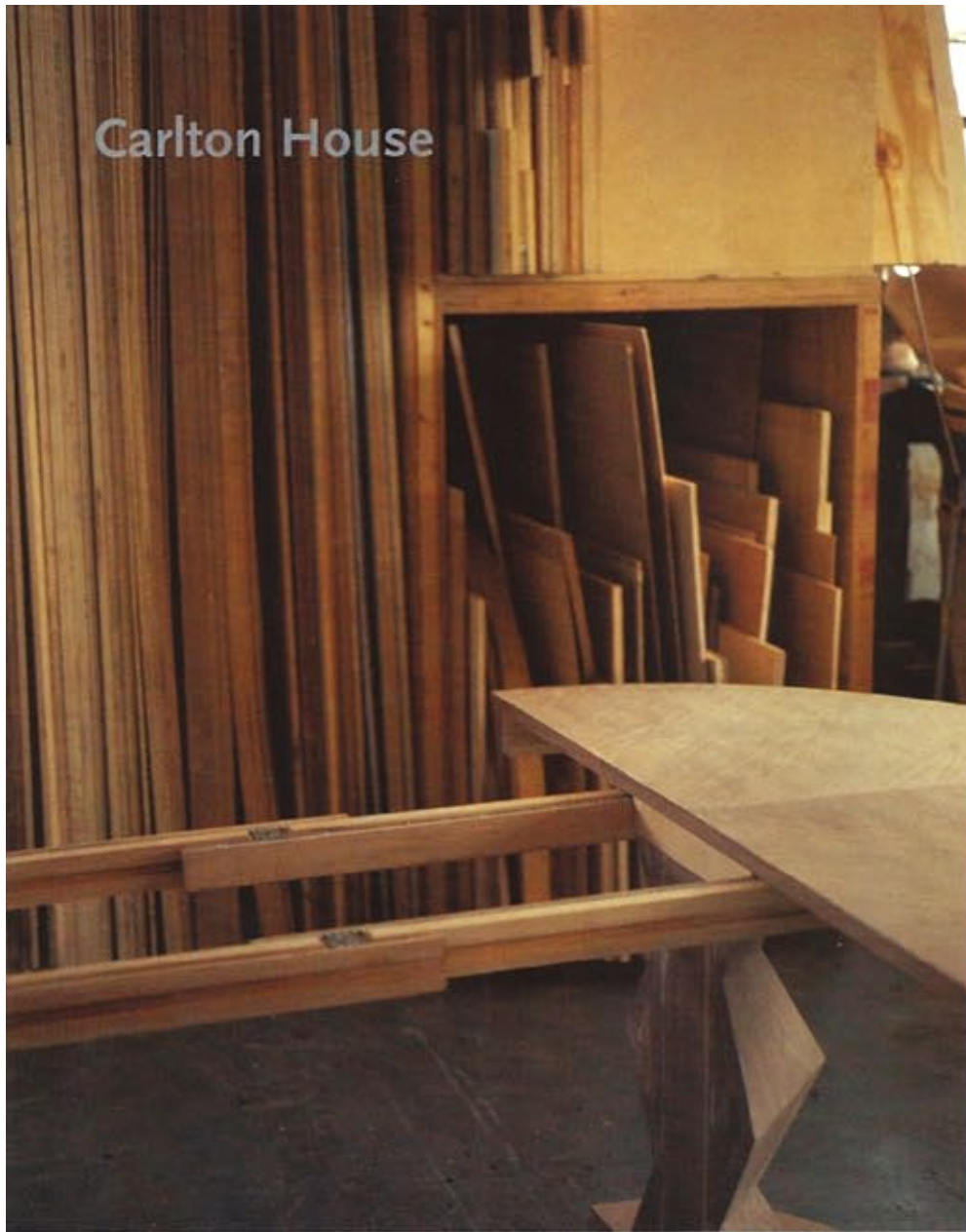
New York designer Darren Henault (opposite page, left) customizes one thing or another for every one of his clients, whether he's working on a Maryland beach house or a 1,000-square foot apartment in Manhattan. The custom route helps him satisfy clients, meld old and new, and—perhaps most importantly—design each space with a freedom and flexibility that standard items just won't allow.

"With custom furniture, a designer can make things as close to perfect as possible," Henault says. He's not opposed to finding something at retail—provided it doesn't take six months of searching—but, as he notes, "you can often design something that works and have it made in less time than it takes to order it."

Admittedly, custom can be more expensive than ready-made, so it's not right for every item. But when you need a dining table to fit an oddly shaped room, or a sofa that suits both your cherished antique table and the space you want to put it in, custom design may be the best solution. As Henault sees it, handcrafted and individually designed items have a certain character: "It's hard to measure or define, but I know that a specially designed, handmade piece adds a great deal to the way you experience a room."

While the client, architect or interior designer may come up with the idea behind a special piece, the artisan or craftsman is the crucial link to making it a reality. Most artisans, in fact, are skilled designers themselves, and can be counted on to add their own aesthetic touches, transforming a rough sketch or concept into the fully realized centerpiece of a room. To understand the process, we trailed Henault on a tour of four of his favorite workrooms, where masters of upholstery, wood, hardware and lighting showed us how to get superb results.

Carlton House



Kenneth Dell, the pony-tailed proprietor of Carlton House, a Long Island City-based workshop, creates fine wooden furniture and impeccable reproductions for top architects and designers. Though he holds a degree in music and philosophy, Dell discovered his true calling when he apprenticed with an English restoration expert, an experience that was “fertile ground for learning the trade,” he says. “It allowed me to understand what happens to antiques that *don't* end up lasting centuries.”

In his own workshop, Dell personally oversees the creation of every piece in his workshop, following projects from conception through execution, and double-checking proportions before okaying a finished piece. As an artisan, he is driven by the details, and his involvement in every stage of the process ensures pieces are truly custom. “That’s why they take 12 weeks to complete,” he says.

Nowadays, Dell has his own apprentice and oversees a staff of

15, including a draftsman, quality manager, supervisor and antique restorer, in addition to cabinetmakers and finishers. As chief designer, Dell meets with his team throughout the process to discuss any changes and modifications to a piece. **“Sometimes the drawings call for six dovetail joints, but I might determine five is better,”** he says.

Clients often come to Carlton House with nothing more than an image from a book or a magazine, relying on Dell’s design experience to develop a piece that suits the way they live. Henault, on the other hand, usually takes Dell a detailed drawing, but he, too, finds himself inspired by the craftsman’s furniture-making expertise. “I listen carefully to what he says, and that information is invaluable,” explains Henault. “Understanding what he is able to do makes me a better designer. If you know how something is done—and how to do it well—you can design it better.”

PREVIOUS PAGE AND RIGHT: For a sleek desk, Kenneth Dell of Carlton House adapted the early-nineteenth-century Regency style to his client’s modern work habits. Combining walnut, ebony embellishments and inset leather, he created a pull-out writing slide for use on top of a drawer. **ABOVE:** Dell made this American walnut extension dining table for clients with a modern-art collection. Its solid walnut base was inspired by the work of sculptor Constantin Brancusi; like the table, it has a walnut veneer.



Sandringham Ltd.



When it comes to upholstery, Henault is a fanatic about proportions. “I want a chair or sofa to be exactly right for the person using it,” he says. Mass-market furniture sometimes works, he adds, “but keep in mind, it’s made for the average person, and everyone is not built the same.”

During our visit to Sandringham Ltd., an upholstery and drapery workroom owned by Erik Dahl, Henault recalled husband and wife clients, 6’3” and 5’4” respectively, who wanted matching club chairs for their bedroom. “You can’t tell me they were going to find the same chair comfortable,” he says.

To head off trouble, Henault designed two chairs that look identical but fully take into account the couple’s different heights and weights. Only the clients, Henault and Dahl knew the chairs were, in fact, quite different. While their frames were the same (that is, the proportions were identical), significant adjustments were made when it came time to assemble the chairs’ bodies and padding. After the clients had several fittings, the seat on the husband’s chair was made three inches deeper and slightly more room was left between the arms on

the inside of the chair to accommodate his larger frame. For the wife’s chair, Dahl adjusted the pitch where the seat met the back of the chair by adding one-third more padding. This created a shallower seat depth, lending greater back support without reducing comfort. Finding such individualized complementary chairs retail would have been next to impossible.

Another important advantage to choosing custom furniture, says Dahl, is that clients can visit a local workroom and see how their piece or pieces are being constructed. “It isn’t like having a sofa made in North Carolina and shipped to your house,” Dahl says. “Clients want to check out cushioning and depth. **Here, you can test how you want to sit in something, and we can make it to accommodate you precisely.”**

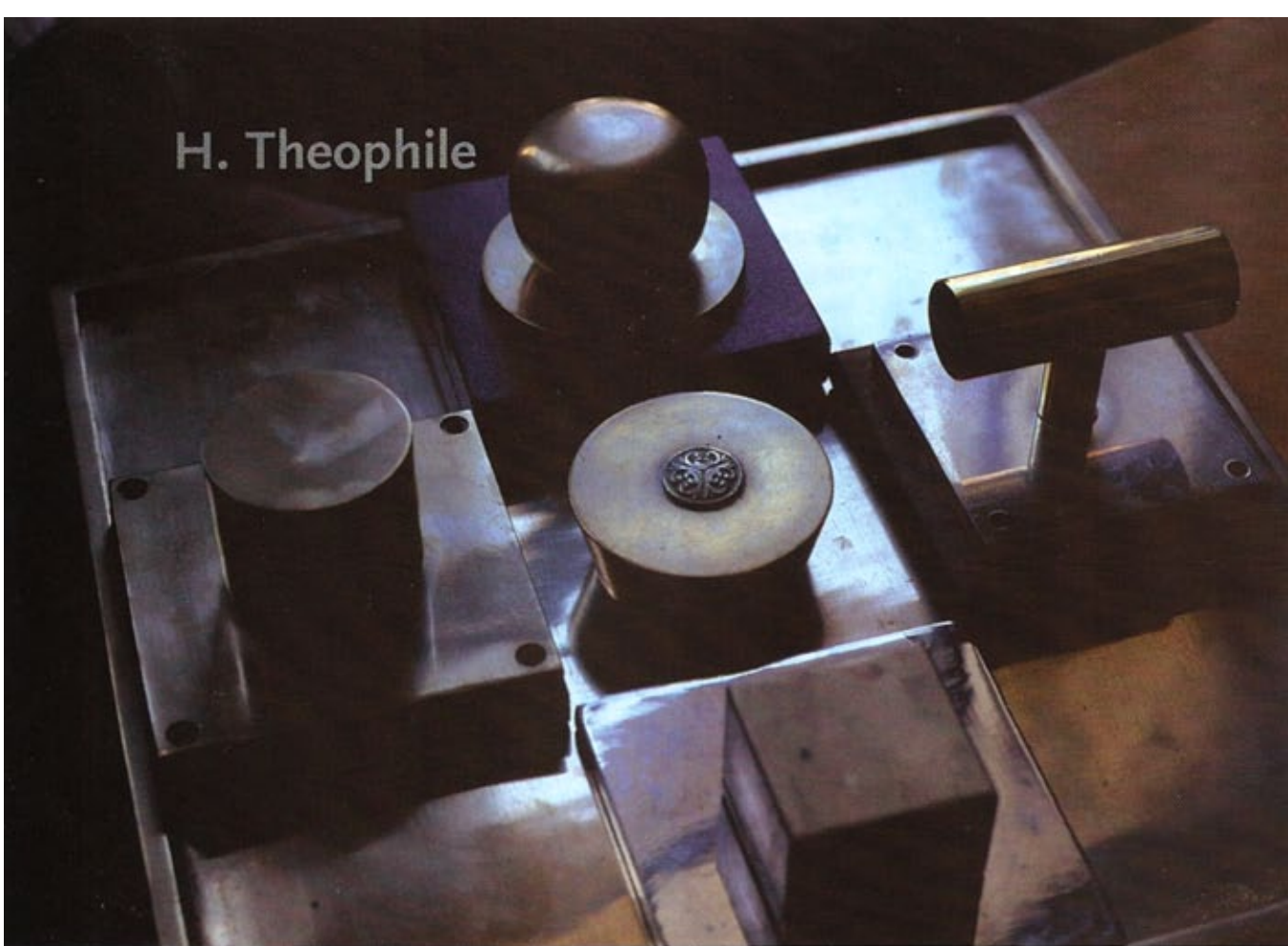
Henault trusts Sandringham because he and Dahl communicate well: “Erik and I share a language and I believe in his ability to turn my vision into a real object. Sometimes we’ll merely have a phone conversation and I’ll fax him a picture, and he will immediately understand—down to the last detail—how I want the sofa to look.”

The upholstered pieces made at Sandringham are built around kiln-dried frames of hardwood maple. Jute webbing in a basket-weave pattern is attached to the frames with heavy-duty staples for stability. This also provides support for eight-way, hand-tied coil springs, which are then covered with burlap to form a base for the filling of the piece—horsehair, cotton or down padding. Sandringham sofas are priced at \$750 a foot, not including upholstery fabric.

ABOVE: A sofa in progress reveals burlap webbing attached to the frame; white muslin covers the inside before it is finished with upholstery fabric. **RIGHT:** Henault and Dahl select materials.



H. Theophile



“Have you noticed how boring door hardware usually is?” asks architect Eric Theophile as we enter his studio. Not at Theophile’s: Here, a door handle—and just about any other kind of decorative hardware you can think of—is an object of adornment. Besides tables covered with standard hardware items—contemporary, classical and reproduction doorknobs, levers and pulls—there are displays of a wide array of inventive metalwork: decorative silver cups, bronze bookends, cut-out copper plates, four-foot-tall candlesticks (based on Theophile’s interpretation of a South Asian oil lamp), a sterling-silver sink with a Romanesque-style bronze rim, a twisted repoussé lamp base, and even sofa and chair legs in silver, bronze and copper.

Darren Henault comes to Theophile for everything from bronze door hardware to sterling-silver sinks. On a recent visit, the two men sipped espresso with a client as they worked through a design (in 30 minutes, no less) for a single bronze door and its hardware. Customizing allows for this kind of easy interchange. Says Henault, “I can have a seed of an idea, and he will follow that idea through and make it workable.”

The architect says he looks for all kinds of imagery or designs to create from. By way of illustration, he shows us an exquisite back plate for a vintage door lever, its design inspired by a 1950s jewelry box of sterling-silver repoussé (i.e., shaped or decorated with patterns in relief). Clients often bring Theophile antiques or photographs from which to replicate a desired object. To him, reproducing something is no less artful than creating it from scratch. “If someone has already designed something really beautiful, why ignore it?” he asks.



ABOVE: A table at H. Theophile displays a new collection called Five Easy Pieces.

LEFT: Theophile and Henault study a mock-up, part of the hardware designer’s process. Like a sculptor, Theophile often makes ad hoc models in metal, plate or cardboard, looking for different uses for hardware and metal fittings. Such inspiration can result in unexpected moments, as “when a doorknob suddenly becomes the perfect foot for a table leg.”