

homestyle



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The new director of Gabberts Design Studio honed his skills at Polo Ralph Lauren in New York. He describes the Gabberts customer as "not dissimilar to who Ralph thought his customer was."

A conversation with Michael Rabatin

• The new head of Gabberts Design Studio is a hometown guy with a penchant for chairs (he had 26 in a 400-square-foot apartment), travel and photography.

By KIM YEAGER
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Q Your new job brought you home?
A I grew up in north Minneapolis, one of six, the middle child. My parents both have six in their families, too. I've got, probably in the Cities, close to 50 first cousins. I went to St. Bridget's, as did all of my siblings. Then we all went to Benilde-St. Margaret's in St. Louis Park.

Q Tell me about your early design influences.

A My father did own a restaurant in northeast Minneapolis that my grandparents started in 1942. It was in the '70s that it turned to Rabatin Cafe. The interior was a gorgeous authentic '40s interior. And that aged and looked terrific, but of course it was the '80s and I thought I knew something because I had just come from Boston [College]. So I created for him some floral arrangements. And to this day he still has those arrangements in the garage. Silk flowers.

Q Do you use silks today?

A No, I don't. I'm a snob about florals: fresh and real!

Q You served a certain customer with the Polo brand. Who is the Gabberts customer?

A Probably not dissimilar to who Ralph thought his customer was and who we try to speak to.

Q What did you take away from your 13-year career there?

A One thing that I've learned that I'm hoping to bring to Gabberts, too, is perspective.

We all come at design from our own creative perspectives, and it's neither right nor wrong. You have to work to shift the perspective. A mentor of mine always said, everything should be "in addition to." "In addition to how I'm suggesting you do this, think about it this way." "In addition to that floor plan, have you thought of this?"

Q And your design vision?

A It's hardly mine. What service can I provide? I've learned in design, it has to satisfy the client, that our clients are

MICHAEL J. RABATIN

Title: Design Studio director, Gabberts.

Grew up: North Minneapolis.

Education: Bachelor of arts, Boston College. Major: English; minor: philosophy. Associate degree of Divinity, All Faiths Seminary, New York.

Previous job: VP at Polo Ralph Lauren in New York City, in charge of store development, creative services, home design, antiques and marketing.

Family: Wife, Lenore, son, Harper.

You might not know: He won a briefcase from NASA in high school for his chronobiology experiment on circadian rhythms and blood pressure.

getting the home that they want, that they're not necessarily getting what I think they should live in. I believe, too, that so much of what our roles are is teaching about quality: the finer ele-

ments to design, when silver and gold can live together. Why is it that you should pay attention to quality.

Q Do you have a favorite design icon?

A I get my dressing clues from Cary Grant. He had beautifully tailored suits. Victoria Hagen has a beautiful aesthetic, with a feminine nature. Dorothy Draper had a fantastic flair. She made bold statements. I would love to try to emulate some of her boldness.

Q What about furniture?

A I have somewhat of an obsession with chairs. In 1993, I had close to 26 chairs and I was living in a 400-square-foot apartment! I like classic modern. I have an 18th-century French farm table. And [I like] for my art to be the accessories in my home.

Q What's inside your Minneapolis loft?

A Photography. Artwork by my nieces and nephews. My grandmother's batiks. When my son was born,

I wanted to create a different version of a nursery. There is a certain color story that exists today around babies. I wanted an all black and white room. In early childhood development kids only see black and white. But then in my world, there is also Lenore. She loves color. So we have an enchanted forest. It is neither black and white nor abundant in color. ... There is a bare concrete pillar in that room. I childproofed it, wrapped it with padding. Now it's a tree.

Q What have you been doing since you left Polo Ralph Lauren?

A We traveled around the world. Spain, Italy, Ireland, Thailand, Cambodia. Spent time with my in-laws in Israel, in Tel Aviv. And it was important to see the U.S. We went from Bangkok to San Francisco and spent four months in a [Honda CRV]. Then we ended up in Maine. Then here.

Q Is it good to be back?

A It's outstanding how talent within the field of design is not necessarily so regional. I'm really impressed with the level of talent here in Minneapolis.