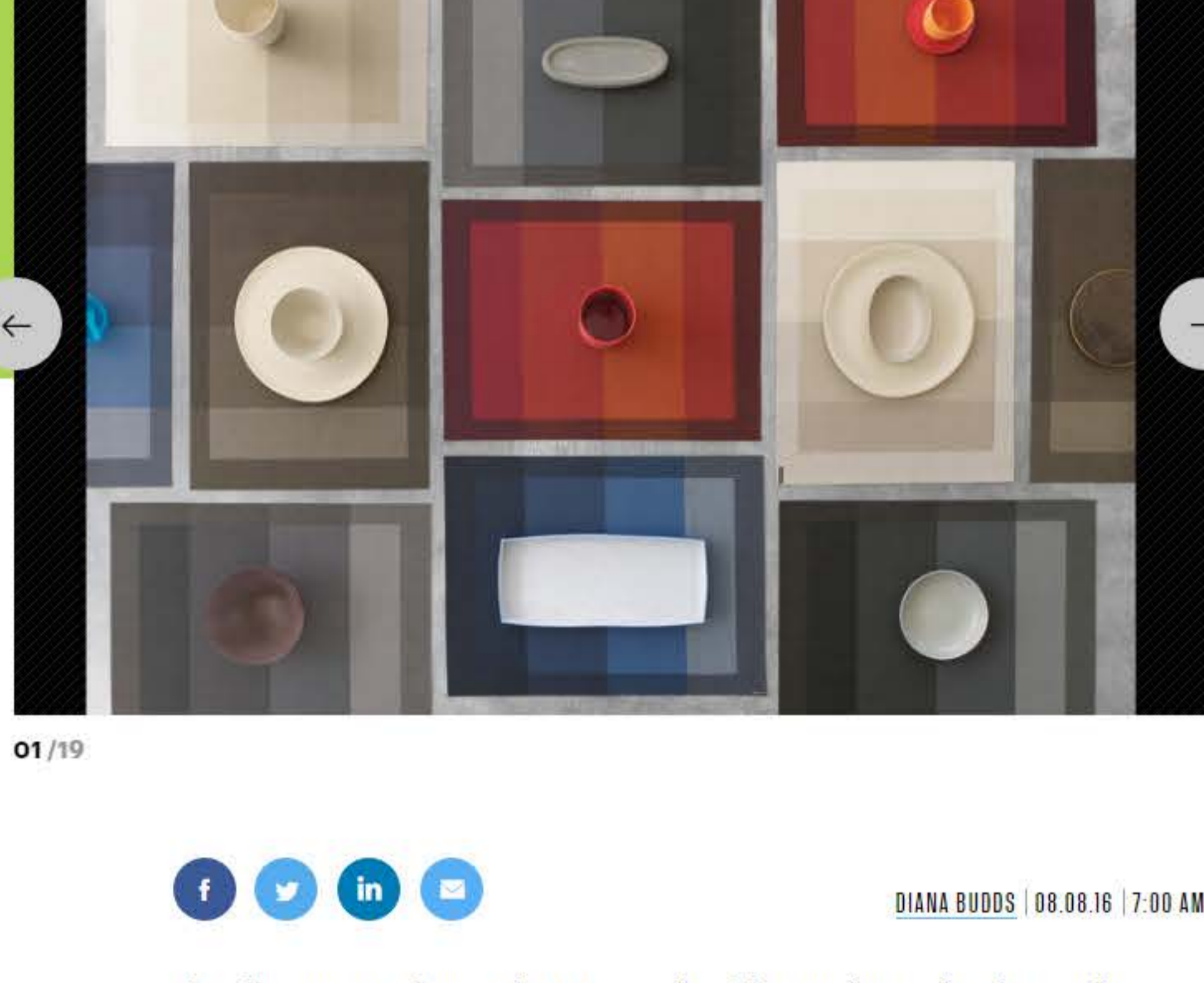
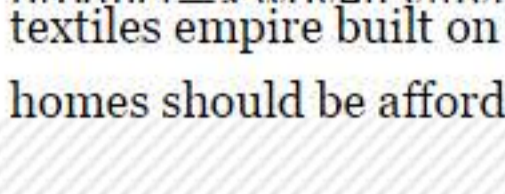


# A \$35 Million Design Empire Built On The Humble Place Mat

Sandy Chilewich started out dyeing fabric in a washing machine in the '70s. Today, her company makes 40,000 place mats a week.

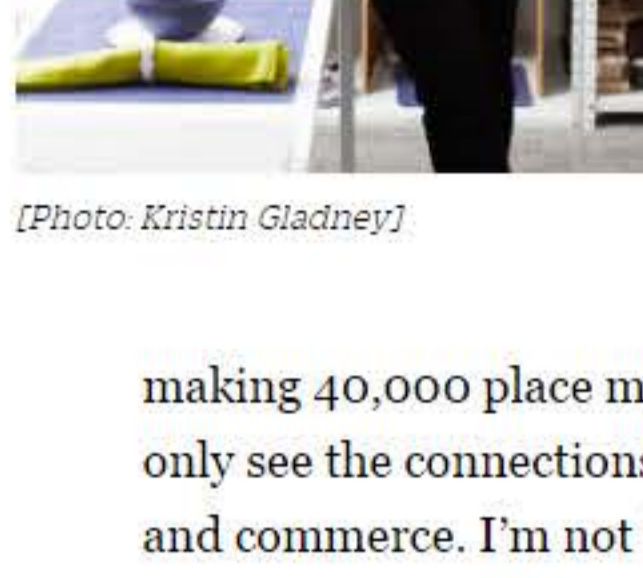


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The place mat sits low on the totem pole of design objects, but for Sandy Chilewich, it's the basis of successful brand. The New York-based designer and lifelong entrepreneur launched her eponymous company in 2000 with one product—a woven vinyl place mat—and has since spun that into a home-textiles empire built on the assumption that the everyday things we use in our homes should be affordable, easy to maintain, and beautiful.



[Photo: Kristin Gladney]

There's a good chance you've eaten at a table that's been set with one of Chilewich's place mats or table runners—even the Obamas have—but before she developed products that can be found in homes and restaurants around the world, she cofounded Hue, the fashion company known for its colorful tights. While it seems like a leap to move from hosiery to housewares, there was one constant: adapting new materials and tweaking manufacturing processes to innovate new mass-produceable designs.

"You only know what you've done in retrospect," Chilewich says of the business ambitions that got her to the point where she's making 40,000 place mats per week and earning \$35 million in revenue. "I only see the connections now . . . My passion is really this balance between art and commerce. I'm not interested in making one-offs of things, and I like to reach a bigger audience without compromising an aesthetic too much—it's a constant balancing act."

Here's how Chilewich built her brand on the back of what's arguably one of the most overlooked household objects.



## TO LIVE OR DYE

Chilewich's foray into design happened in the late 1970s when she was living in Downtown Manhattan.

"The Cliffs Notes version is I was kind of a stumbling twentysomething," she says. "Maybe I was an artist, I didn't know what I was doing. I dropped out of college, and I started designing jewelry." When she was showing her jewelry to a buyer, she wore a pair of inexpensive Mary Janes she bought in Chinatown, bleached and re-dyed. The jewelry didn't stick, but the shoes did. The buyer asked Chilewich if she could make more. Chilewich and her friend and eventual business partner Kathy Moskal scooped up all the shoes they could and set out bleaching and dyeing them in their washing machine at home.

Soon, they were buying up whatever white apparel and garments they could and repeating the process—and their company, Hue, was officially born in 1978. One of the more popular items they hacked were white nurse stockings. In the '70s, women had two options for leg wear: ballet tights or pantyhose, both of which came in basic, neutral colors. Hue's prismatic tights were a hugely popular alternative.

**"We'd get to the factory at 4 a.m. and we'd experiment," Chilewich says.**

As they scaled up, Chilewich and Moskol decided to stop buying tights at retail price and go straight to the source, which led them to factories in Mount Pleasant, North Carolina—where they'd eventually have their breakthrough. There, they saw all the different cottons and lycras with which the mill was working. And like mad scientists let loose in a lab, they began experimenting on ways to achieve a comfortable tight that could be worn without a garter.

"We'd get to the factory at 4 a.m. and we'd experiment," Chilewich says. "They'd have all these machines they let us play with them—I wonder if it was because we were cute girls—but we were there forever."

They ended up developing a one-size-fits-all cotton-and-lycra tight that "stretched and recovered like crazy and put us on the map," Chilewich says.



## TABLING THE PRODUCT

After selling Hue in 1991, Chilewich began producing fruit bowls that used stretch mesh to aerate the produce and keep it fresher longer. Soon, they were being sold at MoMA. While that was a successful design, Chilewich was eager for the next step.

... says. "I could not have sustained myself [with that]. There are only so many people with modern tastes and I think they all bought a bowl. I thought, I'm going to run out of customers. I needed something I could keep going with."

To find inspiration for her next endeavor, she combed through the specimens at the materials library MaterialConnexion and came across a flexible vinyl that was used in outdoor furniture. Recognizing that this was a vastly underutilized textile—it was durable, easy to clean, and looked like a traditional woven fabric—she took it home to experiment. Her instinct was that it would make a great substitute for fabric table linens, which are easy to stain and often require delicate washing. Chilewich's place mat was born.

**"I thought, I'm going to run out of customers."**

Thanks to her prior success with the fruit bowls at the MoMA Store, the museum picked up the place mats. It was part of Chilewich's business strategy to start with design-minded retailers, specialty stores, and independent boutiques. "There's a limit to how 'box' I would go," she says. Today, Chilewich sells an arsenal of textiles for the home in myriad colors, patterns, and textures, but it's all durable vinyl. "I don't rest from trying to be innovative and original with new products," Chilewich says. "I crave product."

There are basket-weave and bouclé place mats and runners. To fabricate her Petal collection, Chilewich looked to a molding process used by a Taiwanese manufacturer of faux lace. Her floor mats have the texture of shag carpets and her window coverings offer the look of natural linen.

Now Chilewich is sold in department stores, through its e-commerce platform, and in its brick-and-mortar shop in Manhattan. The brand could be ordered from Design Within Reach in the past, but it's about to open a series of shop-within-a-shop locations with DWR, starting with its location in Washington, D.C.'s Georgetown neighborhood. Chilewich's textiles will be among the few cash-and-carry items available in the retailer's showrooms.

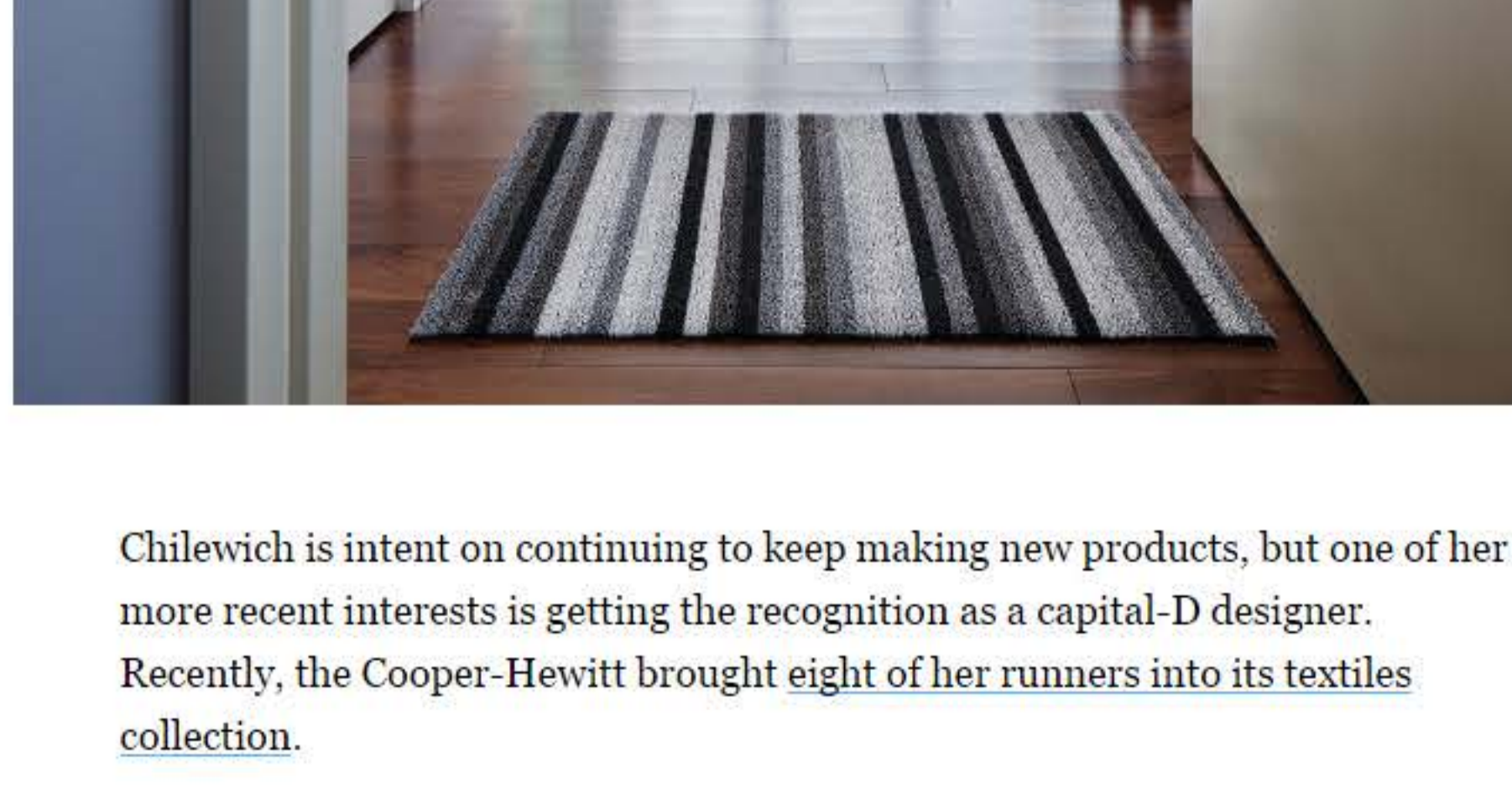


## BORN IN THE USA

The company releases new products seasonally, but doesn't try to follow trends. "I don't like to look at other people's finished work very much," Chilewich says. "I look at art, we look at nature, we look at machinery—that's a big part of it, capability, like taking a process."

**"I feel to some extent that because I've been commercially successful, that somehow I'm not a real designer," she says.**

Over time, Chilewich has developed its own machinery, processes, and materials—like custom vinyl yarn—to make its products. Chilewich's husband and current business partner, Joe Sultan, helped to set up the company's infrastructure. Most of the products are made in the U.S., a move dictated not so much by patriotism as convenience. "I needed to be very in touch with the process," Chilewich says. "I needed to get to the products in a few hours to be able to work on them. I don't want to be removed and I don't want to deal with long lead times." For example, the Basketweave collection features subtle color gradations in each place mat and runner. Achieving the look involved trial and error to get the right mix of hues in the finished product.



Chilewich is intent on continuing to keep making new products, but one of her more recent interests is getting the recognition as a capital-D designer. Recently, the Cooper-Hewitt brought eight of her runners into its textiles collection.

"I feel to some extent that because I've been commercially successful, that somehow I'm not a real designer," she says. "Having the Cooper-Hewitt come in was kind of getting recognition for the innovations that I've done, even if it's just a place mat. It's a humble product. It's in so many people's homes, it's not an expensive product, it's not very precious or for a limited audience. It reaches so many people with different tastes. To get recognized is really nice at this stage of the game."

Though receiving validation for her work was gratifying, she's not seeing that as the ultimate brass ring. "What do I want to do next? I want to do what I'm doing, just keep getting better," she says.

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