FEBRUARY 2013

Interiors & Sources
Excellence in Commercial Design

TECHNOLOGY + INNOVATION
FEATURES

24 Design Collaborative: Design Duet
Designer Joe Doucet works in (somewhat) perfect harmony with Bernhardt Design to create the Duet conferencing chair.
By Kylie Wroblaski

42 Feature: Playing Nice
A few A/V and tech professionals give us the low-down on what you should expect from them on your next project.
By AnnMarie Martin

46 Photo Essay: Banking on a Dream
Chute Gerdeman helps American Family Insurance protect the dreams of its customers in the DreamBank, a homey, tech-inspired office in Madison, Wis.
By Elianne Halbersberg

50 Photo Essay: Battling the Dark Side
The design team at HMC Architects creates a high-tech, high-touch space where visitors can immerse themselves in the McAfee brand and experience its real-time approach to cybersecurity through a highly choreographed architectural narrative.
By Robert Nieminen

In this Issue
8 Editorial
10 Noteworthy
14 Green Notes: Let the Sunshine In
Daylight modeling can help you design more enjoyable and sustainable interiors—here's how.
By Tim Metcalfe

16 Trends: Research Goes Digital
By Margie Monin Dombrowski

20 Profile: Sandy Chilewich
By Erika Templeton

38 Feature: 30 Apps for 2013

55 CEU: Phonebooks & Mailboxes
Mobility and technology together have created great benefits, not just for businesses, but also for their workers and the world.
By Steve Delfino

65 Advertisers’ Index

66 On the Horizon

Association Forums
60 ASID: (Em)Powering Tech
Emerging technologies can help communicate the value of interior design and drum up new business—here’s how to put them to work for you.
By Barbara Marini

63 IIDA: The Tech Effect
Technology is a constant presence for many of us, but how is that changing how we interact with and design the next generation of interiors?
By James Williamson

Product Sources
26 Product Q&A
28 Lighting
32 I&S Materials Pavilion
36 Conferencing Elements
The design industry is marked by fast-paced manufacturing, material innovation and radical aesthetic shifts—the constant search for “what’s new” and “what’s next.”

While it may be seductive to envision the process behind these dynamic shifts to be as radical as its results, it is often the small but well-considered tweaks that shift and shape the industry.

Take Sandy Chilewich, a career change-maker with a resume spanning fashion, fine art, home décor, hospitality design and contract flooring. She has a consistently sharp eye for innovation opportunities hidden in plain sight.

“My passion as a designer,” says Chilewich, now creative director of her namesake brand, Chilewich | Sultan, “is about looking at a manufacturing process and what it’s making and realizing, ‘God, this could be so much more interesting if they could just change it a little bit.’”

Her Midtown headquarters are a tactile designer’s dream—an organized chaos of fabric swatches, material samples and idea books, all peeking out of cubbies and begging to be examined.

Sandy treats the dining table like a sit-in closet and designs tabletop lines as though they are fashion seasons going down the runway—to be collected and recombined over time. And now, as the company’s product line expands through upholstery, window coverings, wall coverings and flooring, new pairings can pop up just about anywhere.

“I’m just dreaming about the idea of this layering on top of each other,” Chilewich says. “It’s no easy feat, to take something that was designed as an upholstery and then try to have it work as a floorcovering. It’s been unbelievably hard, but satisfying.”

Prior to Chilewich | Sultan, her efforts were focused on more consumer-facing products. In 1978, she co-founded HUE, where she and her partner, “two young women in a 1970s loft in SoHo, making a billion mistakes and growing like crazy,” produced the first natural fiber stretch tights in an unprecedented range of colors. They had single-handedly changed hosiery from a commodity into a fashion statement.

Chilewich sold the company in 1991 and went out on her own in 1994, finding herself more and more drawn to home design over fashion. She honed her design skills by creating a personal collection of mats and placemats, and eventually expanded into home textiles and accessories under her own name.

While scores of designers and entrepreneurs have spent their careers trying to invent something new, Sandy Chilewich has spent hers making revolutionary products out of what’s already there.
in on evolving the concept of the butterfly chair to work for the tabletop. Enter the RayBowl™, a first-of-its-kind bowl formed from concaved textile.

“As simple and as stupid as it sounds, no one has ever done that,” says Chilewich, who secured several patents for the design.

Much like HUE, RayBowl grew quickly. Chilewich found herself constantly experimenting with materials until 1999, when another discovery sent her career off on a new course once again.

Looking to create an outdoor line of RayBows, she found herself on a mission for vinyl—though her description of it now sounds more like a haphazard hunt. “All I kept seeing were those ‘50s folding chairs with the web criss-cross thing, and I’m thinking, how am I going to find this material if I don’t know what it is?”

She walked through Material ConnexXion’s doors, just as the material library was taking off. It was then that she forged her long-term love affair with woven vinyl, although at the time her prince charming was still just a frog.

“I thought it was pretty ugly, which is probably why you never saw it on furniture anywhere,” she says, “but I fell in love with certain aspects of it.”

First among them were its durability and washability, and later its aesthetic versatility, once Chilewich went to see it being made in a factory in Georgia. Extruded yarns opened up possibilities for sheen and metallic finishes, and bicolor dying led to unpredictable weaves with an appealing, natural quality—a “no-brainer place mat,” she recalls thinking.

Chilewich got to work making placemats and bags out of a one-room studio on Lafayette in Manhattan. But when the downtown scene became too trendy, rent prices started rising, and she knew it was time to move on.

Her husband, Joe Sultan, had an architectural practice in Midtown and invited her to take over one of the floors he was renting. Once she moved in, Sultan started stepping in to help problem solve on new product development; by 2004, the couple had formed Chilewich | Sultan.

“He really helped engineer a more sophisticated backing for the flooring, because as an architect he felt there was real potential for [woven vinyl] commercially,” she says. “He fell in love with it all over again, like I did.”

Sultan eventually went down to Chilewich’s manufacturing base in Georgia to find a better way to back the material, and the couple launched Plynyl® flooring at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in 2001.

“I swear it was a phenomenon,” Chilewich recalls. “We couldn’t breathe because there were so many people in the booth. It was just so new.”

They took home the ICFF Editors Award for Carpet and Flooring, and have been developing new products ever since. Sultan is now CEO of Chilewich | Sultan, while Chilewich operates as creative director.

The two of them form a powerful combination. Where Chilewich experiments to bring new weaves, shapes and textures to market, Sultan brings a deep understanding of the material needs from an architect’s perspective. Together, they formulate fully realized ideas where aesthetics and performance meet. And while she stands in as a front woman for the brand, he is able to tinker behind the scenes, fine-tuning the “methyl- exyl- dextyl- crexyls” of the process, he says.

But don’t let the jokes fool you. Sultan is an R+D guy, with a straight gaze and a solid grasp on what makes a material work. Recently, he helped Chilewich introduce a tile backing system called BioFelt™, a fabric-like material composed of 82 percent pre- and post-consumer content.

As with most of Chilewich’s new projects, BioFelt got off to an auspicious start when Oakley chose Chilewich as an exclusive flooring and tabletop partner for the design of the Oakley Safehouse at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London.

Oakley’s Safehouse program has been running since 1996, and is aimed at providing Olympians with a relaxing escape between events. The 2012 Safehouse spanned two floors of London’s Design Museum—all covered in Chilewich Plynyl with BioFelt backing.

 Barely stopping to celebrate BioFelt’s successful first year on the market, the two are already knee deep in their next innovation. This time Sultan is working against petroleum-based phthalate plasticizers—the compounds put in plastics to make them malleable and soft.

If all goes according to plan, we may be seeing new corn- and soy-based backings for Chilewich’s contract flooring products as early as 2013. For those focused more in the consumer market, don’t feel left out just yet. Chilewich will begin selling iPhone 5 cases in Apple stores this March, too.

CONTACT

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FUN FACT
RayBowl is named after Sandy’s son Raymond, who is now 25 and working for Chilewich | Sultan.

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