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Architects explore new markets with hardware, lighting, furniture

By SAM BENNETT
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For Jay Deguchi, good design is all about noise reduction.

To eliminate what he calls visual noise, Deguchi strives for designs in which all the components work in harmony.

“If architecture is fairly quiet, it achieves a character of place,” said Deguchi, a principal with Seattle's Suyama Peterson Deguchi. “When an object within a home screams louder than the architecture, then sometimes it isn't compatible and the design doesn't work well together. We try to cohesively fit everything together.”



Images courtesy of Graypants [\[enlarge\]](#)

Cloud is a custom lighting piece designed by Graypants for Airbnb's headquarters in San Francisco.

This visual choreography is a balancing act between architecture and fixtures — from floor lamps to fireplace tool sets and even coasters.

“We design items that are an aesthetic match with the homes we design,” said Deguchi. “It's the small pieces that come together in a residence or even a commercial project that seamlessly work to create an overall character that makes a space feel good in a certain way.”

In the last 15 years, architects locally and internationally, such as Zaha Hadid Design and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, have branched out to offer high-end architectural hardware as part of their design solutions.

In Seattle, a handful of architects have partnered with local fabricators to produce limited productions of hardware, furniture and lighting. These give clients a less-expensive option compared to custom hardware and furniture — and hand-crafted items they can't find in most stores.

Bohlin Cywinski Jackson has designed a range of products for single-family homes, public projects and commercial buildings — everything from cabinet pulls to light fixtures, tables and desks.

Among the custom pieces BCJ designed for the Ballard Public Library in 2003 were door handles that “fit so comfortably in the user's hands, they bring a smile to their faces,” said Robert Miller, a principal with BCJ.

“People ask us to design a wide range of hardware and furniture projects, from very modest to more significant budgets,” Miller said. “Producing a line of hardware allows us to delight the owners of a modest house every time they open the front door.”

With limited production, the hardware and furniture lines may not be a cash cow for local architects, but they allow designers to give a custom look to the buildings and homes they design.

The hardware and fixtures also give designers such as Tom Kundig exposure in a growing niche market.

“It expands our reach to the design world on a different scale,” said Kundig, a principal with Seattle's Olson Kundig, which specializes in homes as well as museums and exhibition spaces.

Kundig launched the Tom Kundig Collection in 2012 and now the line has more than 100 hardware pieces.

“It has been overwhelmingly gratifying because it offers a way to work on parts of projects that we hold most important to our work, which are the parts and pieces of the building we physically touch,” he said. “It’s a continual evolution, depending on the variety of project types and our client needs.”

12th Avenue Iron

The Kundig Collection has been a boon for 12th Avenue Iron, which forges and fabricates the pieces. Stephen Marks, a principal with 12th Avenue Iron, said the collection represents about 30 percent of his company’s total production each year.

Marks said 12th Avenue Iron initiated the idea for the collection five years ago, after working with the firm on custom pieces.

“We knew how popular Tom was, and he was getting to be more and more popular,” Marks said. “We didn’t know if people were aware of him nationally or around the world. But it started gradually and has progressed perfectly. Now it’s a significant part of our business.”

In 12th Avenue Iron’s 10,000-square-foot building on South Dearborn Street, Marks said two workers are dedicated solely to the Kundig Collection, fabricating pieces for homes and buildings from Singapore to England and Africa.

Clients include architects, interior designers, commercial developers and homeowners.

“The big advantage of ordering from the Tom Kundig Collection is that you’re getting designs by a world renowned architect and high quality craftsmanship, without paying the cost of custom one-off design and fabrication,” he said. “You can have a piece custom built for your space, without paying for all the initial R & D that went into designing and engineering the products.”

While the products sell well today, in the beginning Marks said there was “significant risk” for 12th Avenue Iron due to the front-end costs of fabricating prototypes. The initial costs are so high that Marks said he’s turned down offers to fabricate hardware for other local architects who don’t have Kundig’s brand recognition.

“A lot of time and effort went into developing all of the (Kundig) designs,” he said. “When Tom rejected a piece, we had to go through another round of prototyping.”

But Kundig said there was never a question of whether to have the pieces fabricated here or save money by having them manufactured overseas.

“Seattle has a rich tradition of metal working,” said Kundig. “The area’s logging, mining, fishing and airplane industries required a highly skilled workforce who appreciated the crafting of things. This collection has always been practitioner-rooted and about reconnecting to the craft of architecture. It only made sense we would work with local craftspeople.”

Graypants

That same interest in working with local fabricators inspired Seth Grizzle and Jonathan Junker of Seattle’s Graypants to found their furniture and lighting business in Seattle in 2008.

Grizzle and Junker, who met while studying architecture at Kent State University, design an extensive line of lamps, as well as chairs, worktables and even an ice press for making cocktails. Graypants also has an office in Amsterdam.

“We’ve worked extremely hard to underpin the product line with values important to us, and I think people notice and respect that,” said Junker. “They’re sustainable, handmade, produced locally in Seattle and Amsterdam, and we partner with social works programs to provide craft-



[\[enlarge\]](#)
Graypants also makes a line of fixtures called Scraplights.

based jobs to people with mental and physical disabilities.”

Trained as architects, the two said they felt it was important to break away from the technological side of designing buildings.

“We wanted to get our eyes off the computer screen and our hands dirty,” said Junker, “and that started with literally crafting furniture and other objects in our living rooms.”

“We’ve always believed in a hands-on-based approach to design, and we started Graypants as an opportunity to explore bridging the gap between technology and craft,” he said.

Graypants works locally and internationally, mainly with architects and designers. They just returned from the International Contemporary Furniture Fair to spread the word about expanding their lighting designs.

“We will be rolling out a larger retail effort this year in the U.S., as well, for our lighting,” he said. “We can make our lights tiny or gigantic and any shape needed, so we don’t often have to decline an opportunity.”

Room to grow

While Graypants aggressively builds a client base, for architects such as Deguchi a narrower focus may not bring large profits — but he said the bottom line isn’t his priority.

“We’re not profitable at all,” Deguchi said, referring to his firm’s line of hardware, lighting and furniture offered exclusively at Suyama Peterson Deguchi’s store at its Seattle headquarters, called 3x10.

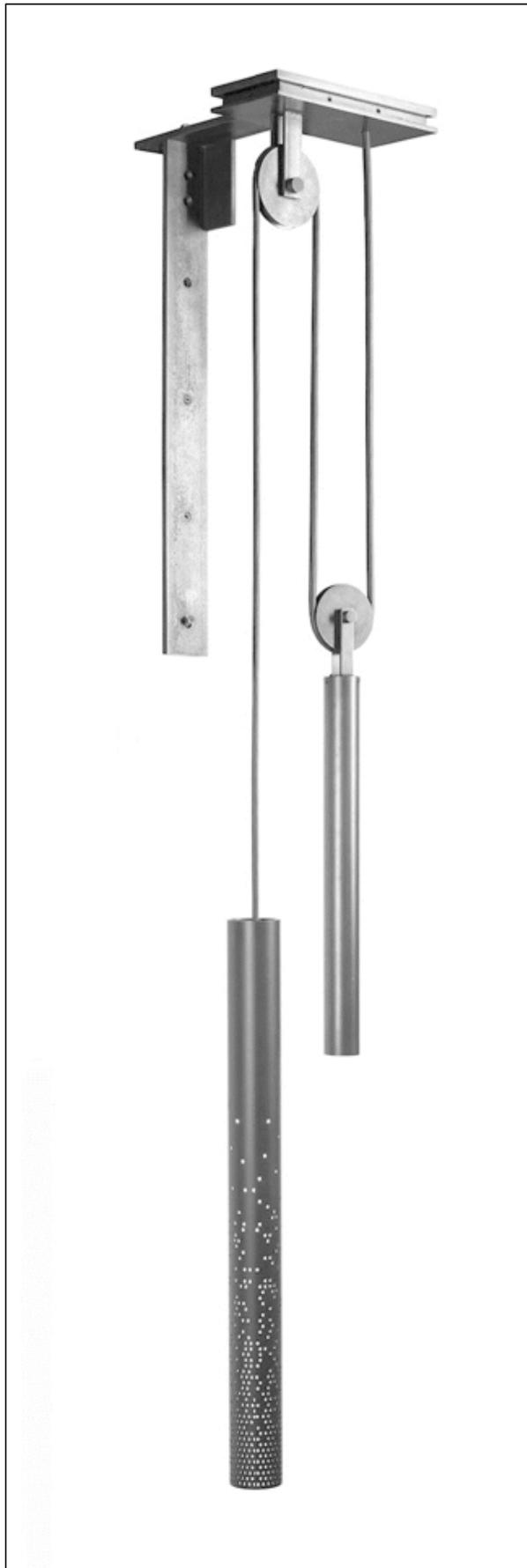
The product line, in fact, was partially inspired by the goal of helping local fabricators during the 2008 economic downturn.

“When the economy was not doing well a lot of fabricators were slow, so this was a way for them to stay busy when they didn’t have a lot of work,” Deguchi said.

In addition to putting fabricators to work during tough times, the product line gives Suyama Peterson Deguchi the chance to advance good design.

“We do it because of our continued passion of trying to create the best possible spaces we can and that means creating furnishings hand-in-hand with an overall idea of a design,” Deguchi said.

For 12th Avenue Iron the increasing workload opens the possibility of expanding and Marks said he has the floor space available to take on more work.



[\[enlarge\]](#)
Tom Kundig launched the Tom Kundig Collection in 2012. The line now has more than 100 hardware pieces forged and fabricated by 12th Avenue Iron in Seattle.

“There are new pieces being added almost all the time,” Marks said, referring to the Kundig Collection. “Things are in the pipeline at various levels of development, and we’ve become more well known by doing the product line.”

At BCJ, Miller said it's in the firm's DNA to continually refine and improve “thoughtfully designed pieces” made by local craftspeople, and present them to clients with large and small budgets. BCJ has collaborated with local architect Jim Cutler of Cutler Anderson Architects on cabinet pulls and has refined that design over the years.

Cutler Anderson also has several lines of custom designed hardware for buildings it designs.

“The availability of unique hardware at an affordable price makes them very attractive to projects with modest budgets or even more complex projects that cannot afford the research or trial-and-error process of developing custom pieces,” Miller said. “What our clients have in common is their desire for exceptional design.”

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