DESIGN & DECORATING

It's a Little You, a Little Me

How do you take a style you admire and make it your own? Learn from design luminaries who have been mentored by the best

THE MENTOR:

ALBERT HADLEY

e half of the famed decorating office Parish-Hadley Associates—whose client list reads like the Social gister—Mr. Hadley is often referred to as the dean of American decorating. He died earlier this year.

The celebrated red-lacquer library that Mr. Hadley envisioned for philanthropist Brooke or's Park Avenue duplex gets all the attention, but her master bedroom is just as much of a showpiece. Designed in the early 1980s—and an update of Parish-Hadley's original scheme—the room uxtaposes restful hues, pedigreed antiques and modern artwork to create an oasis of patrician calm. Mr. Hadley used the same pale-green Alan Campbell foliage print for the walls and draperies, instilling coziness and intimacy in a grandly proportioned space. He furnished the suite like a multitasking lon, with a desk, sitting area and a scattering of armchairs for bedside lounging. In lieu of nightstands is a pair of mismatched tables; swing-arm lamps offer a warm glow. The vibe is dainty yet strong, simultaneously old-world and forward thinking.

HIS PROTÉGÉ:

BUNNY WILLIAMS

Ms. Williams opened her firm in 1988, after more than two decades with Parish-Hadley. She has a furniture line, BeeLine Home, and runs the outdoor furnishings company Treillage with her husband, antiques dealer John Rosselli.

Ms. Williams's own bedroom exemplifies her personal style. Mismatched bedside tables make for a less "decorator-y" look; tall lamps cast light at just the right height for reading in bed. Her palette is restful and a bit feminine. "I love bright modern prints, but I tend to use them sparingly since you tire of them. I do neutral—never white-on-white—rooms." The mirrored bed is a 1930s creation by French designer/artist Serge Roche; Ms. Williams upholstered the headboard in an Indian-inspired silk embroidery by Naeem Khan. "I like fabrics to look natural, whether a cotton or a silk or a good imitation"—a bias rooted in her Parish-Hadley days. The sumptuous bedscape, though, is all her: "People who work for me always say that once they've learned how to make a Bunny bed, they can never go back!"

The Chain of Influence: Four bedrooms reveal how design DNA evolves from generation to generation

HIS PROTÉGÉ:

NICK OLSEN

Upon graduating from Columbia University, where he considered majoring in architecture, Mr. Olsen apprenticed with Mr. Redd for five years before striking out on his own. nickolsenstyle.com

Mr. Olsen gave the master suite of his clients' Upper East Side apartment flair via hand-painted scenic wallpaper (a treatment often deployed by the other three designers as well). To keep the look fresh, bold accents like the bright yellow lamps serve to "young it down." The four-poster mahogany bed—which the designer whitewashed—is from Oscar de la Renta Home, of which Mr. Redd is creative director. Although Mr. Olsen prefers asymmetrical furniture arrangements, here he instilled order by echoing the bedside pieces. Taking a page from Ms. Williams, he eschewed low tables in favor of slightly taller chests that elevate the lamps, making it easier to read in bed and offering more storage space in tight quarters.

HER PROTÉGÉ:

MILES REDD

Mr. Redd began his design career working for Mr. Rosselli, then moved to Ms. Williams's firm. He opened his own studio in 1998 and took on the creative directorship of Oscar de la Renta Home in 2003. milesredd.com

Look familiar? "Bunny's mirrored bed inspired my own," said Mr. Redd of his canopied design. "I give her total props for letting me copy it." Antiqued mirror gives his bed a more burnished effect than the reflective shimmer of its inspiration, while a mattress-ticking stripe adds a masculine element. In contrast to Ms. Williams's more ethereal aerie, Mr. Redd's space is grounded by dramatic touches like crisp black lampshades and framed drapes. The sheen of low, mother-of-pearl side tables is offset by a fur bedspread. "Balancing texture was something Bunny taught me: You can't have lacquer next to lacquer. You have to juxtapose shiny with rough, graphic with organic."

clockwise from top left: William P. Steele/Condé Nast Archive; Pieter Estersohn; Paul Costello; Melanie Acevedo/Veranda Magazine

BY JEN RENZI

SO YOU'VE FLAGGED that single perfect photo in the stacks of decorating books cluttering your coffee table. You've found inspiration! Now comes the hard part: How do you put your own spin on that look, and adapt it to suit your needs?

We aren't the only ones who weather that challenge. Even decorators frequently grapple with the fine art of translation, especially at the dawn of their careers. Apprenticeship is something of a ventriloquism act, as professionals typically train under a mentor whose aesthetic they admire and whose design language they must internalize. When the protégé goes solo, his or her own vision blossoms—and yet inevitably bears the imprint of the mentor's DNA, from fabric preferences to favored furnishings and accessories.

Take designer Bunny Williams, who learned the tricks of the trade from society decorator Albert Hadley, renowned for giving classically appointed rooms a sense of architectural rigor and livability. "Albert was a true teacher, incredibly generous in sharing his experience and vision," said Ms. Williams. From him she learned how to run a business, collaborate with artisans and intermingle antiques with modern pieces. Most importantly, she mastered the fundamentals of a superior floor plan. "He taught me to lay out rooms based on how you really live in them. Ask anyone who worked at Parish-Hadley: We all execute the same furniture arrangements over and over again because they work. Our use of space is very similar regardless of our style."

She could say the same of her own protégé, New York decorator Miles Redd, whose glam interiors are likewise arrayed with convivial conversation, reading and relaxation in mind. "Bunny taught me everything I know: how one good thing can elevate everything else in a room; how to juxtapose materials and textures; who will upholster a chair for you overnight; how to arrange furniture; that a 7½-foot sofa should be 38 inches deep. From working for her, I have five pages of notes on curtains alone!" While his dandyish décor often nods to 1930s tailoring and '60s swank, Ms. Williams's unpretentious worldliness is evident, too.

> 'Mr. Hadley, Bunny, Miles—they all have such a strong sense of scale and appropriateness,' said Nick Olsen of his predecessors.

Mr. Redd has also been known to channel his mentor's mentor. "When you work for someone who came from Parish-Hadley, you inevitably reference the firm's iconic interiors," he said. Mr. Redd lovingly riffed on the famous red-lacquered library Mr. Hadley designed for Brooke Astor. "Why mess with perfection? I consider it a friendly homage," said Mr. Redd. "And I always divulge the reference because the end result inevitably feels different." Another Parish-Hadley signature that's been passed down through the generations: taxicab-yellow walls. "We used that paint color a lot at Bunny's," Mr. Redd said, "and I still use it today."

So does Nick Olsen, who credits his former boss, Mr. Redd, for schooling him in all matters décor. "When I came to work for Miles, I had a strong sense of what I liked," Mr. Olsen said, "but I wasn't sure how to translate that to decorating." Years spent executing someone else's style helped him to refine his own, he explained. Of course, it helps that the two have simpatico sensibilities. "For instance, Miles is brilliant at layering; that comes from a love of doodads, which I share." Other Redd trademarks were an acquired taste. "At first, I didn't get his thing for animal prints or velvet!" But now Mr. Olsen, who launched his firm in 2010, embraces both.

The young decorator's predecessors continue to inspire him. In fact, his initial ideation phase for a project often begins by leafing through design books to scrutinize how his heroes put rooms together. "Mr. Hadley, Bunny, Miles—they all have such a strong sense of scale and appropriateness; their choices are so purposeful, and there's a confidence to their gestures." One look at Mr. Olsen's own tailored interiors and you'll see that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.