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One of a Kind in the Heart of Brooklyn

Andrea Cross took a small group of designers and architects on a field trip to small artisan workshops IN.SEK Design, Wüd Furniture Design and Avram Rusu Studio

Story by Deborah J. Brannon

Remember field trips? Those heady days when you skipped out of school on a condoned trip to someplace new, exciting and filled with fine arts or hands-on experiences? When we leave school and launch our careers, we forget field trips.

Andrea Cross, though, remembers how direct experience with concepts and production can open up new worlds of appreciation and fascination for us, enriching our careers, inspiring us, and improving the value we offer our clients. So she called upon that school-year magic once again, and took her colleagues on a field trip.

Meet Andrea Cross

Andrea Cross is the lively and creative mind behind Axel Interiors, her lovingly curated shop featuring what she calls “extraordinary objects for everyday living.” Andrea happily ran her interior design business entirely from home for many years, before conceiving and opening her retail outlet out of a passion for fine handcrafted furnishings and decorative elements. She strives to support and promote items made by designer/makers—those genius craftsmen (and women!) who create their tables or lights or chairs in small workshops in the

design communities around Connecticut and New York.

Andrea often encounters these practitioners sharing their wares at trade shows, but otherwise it can be difficult to find these brands, which produce stunning work but perhaps lack the advertising budget to attain a high profile. Andrea decided her colleagues need access to these brands between shows, and she’s just the ambassador to highlight these designer/makers. So Axel Interiors was born—and later, this field trip. According to Edie van Breems, cofounder of Eleish van Breems, “Axel Interiors is one of our go-to resources for fabulous new furniture manufacturers. Andrea’s edit and eye for new talent is always spot-on, so when Andrea and East Coast Home + Design invited us to visit some of the workrooms of the Brooklyn manufactures represented at Axel Interiors, we knew we were in for an exciting and interesting day.” Edie’s faith was abundantly rewarded.

The Field Trip

Andrea invited a select group of the most creative and high-level professionals in her community of architects and designers to meet at Axel Interiors early one morning. Attendees included Tina Anastasia (Mark P. Finlay Interiors, South-



port); Amanda Martocchio (Amanda Martocchio Architecture + Design LLC, New Canaan); Douglas Graneto (Douglas Graneto Design, Greenwich); Anthony Minichetti (Anthony Minichetti Architect LLC, Greenwich); Beth Krupa (Beth Krupa Interiors, Old Greenwich); Rhonda Eleish and Edie van Breems (Eleish van Breems, Westport). Our own editor, Matthew Kolk, was also in attendance. Once assembled, the group took a chartered bus to New York City, where they visited three Brooklyn workshops: IN.SEK Design, Wüid Furniture Design and Avram Rusu Studio.

Andrea also arranged a lavish meal at Leuca at the William Vale hotel, where the group was joined by Ashira Israel, owner of IN.SEK; Corey Springer, founder of Wüid Furniture Design; and Andreea Avram Rusu, principal of Avram Rusu Studio.

IN.SEK Design

IN.SEK Design works primarily with concrete, wood and metal to create and craft solid, sophisticated furniture and lighting for both corporate offices



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and private residences. The firm operates with a very deliberate and intentional spirit behind a battle flag planted against wasteful, disposable culture and the poorly-made furnishings that go along with it. According to IN.SEK owner Ashira Israel, “Andrea brought a group of colleagues to introduce them to our work and share the back-end part of the furniture and home decor business that most people do not get to see—where all the magic happens and everything gets made—literally something from nothing, all thanks to skilled hands and passionate hearts.” Ashira discussed the careful planning that goes into the layout of their space, along with the materials and tools they use, before sharing some in-progress projects on the workbenches and a selection of pristine finished products.

Douglas Graneto found Ashira’s work fascinating, noting that she almost seemed to play with the products she created, experiencing the sheer joy of making something. Reflecting on her light fixtures, he added, “I’m fascinated by her use of concrete; I love the concept. You don’t think of concrete for light fixtures as completely transparent—nothing gets through it—but she uses it in a really creative manner. Her lighting has stuck with me.”

Beth Krupa was equally enthused. “Her work with wood, metal and concrete was so creative and unique,” she said. “My favorite items were the live edge headboard with portable wood rail system, and the poured concrete lighting pendants mixed with wood and a distressed patchiness that makes them so one-of-a-kind

and a real focal point. You can feel her love of these materials and unique perspective, creating items that are both functional and sculptural.”

Also impressed was Anthony Minichetti, who commented, “IN.SEK’s intermix of concrete, steel, wood and crystal gems in furniture and accessory pieces were tectonic masterpieces.”

One piece showcased on the field trip was the firm’s SQR side table. “It is a feat of engineering with a mix of materials, including concrete, wood, and felt,” Ashira revealed. “I showed everyone all the initial prototypes and the nine or so iterations we had to go through during our development of the piece before we finally had one I was happy with.” She explained that the mix between concrete and wood resulted in unique challenges: wood expands and concrete contracts as they each cure. But experimentation and perseverance carried the day, and she’s proud to offer the piece now for purchase.

Ashira was delighted with the field trip: her staff modeled their steadfast work ethic and had a chance to declaim on their core philosophies regarding design and sustainability. Indeed, Andrea explained that IN.SEK uses wood from naturally fallen trees whenever possible, and supports planting new trees in place of those used. She also noted that Ashira provides a fresh perspective—especially for designers and architects who are around mid-career—in that she offers a peek into the considerations of millennials. “She’s a real reflection of her genera-

tion, and she designs pieces for that,” said Andrea. “For example, she makes a bed that can be broken up and shipped in a UPS box and be assembled, because she knows her peers move frequently. And nobody wants to spend \$800 to have a shipping company deliver a bed for them when they might move in nine months. So she is very thoughtful about every step of the life of a piece of furniture: Is it responsible the way it’s made and where the wood comes from? Will this live—will this not wind up in a landfill or on Craigslist or someplace else?” Andrea also spoke enthusiastically about Ashira’s Excavation series that adds quartz crystal to concrete, creating “seemingly weightless concrete containers,” as Rhonda Eleish put it, with alluring texture and voids.

“It was a rare opportunity to share our love of making to a receptive audience who so rarely get to see the process in the products and furniture they spec out on a regular basis,” Ashira commented. “It was fantastic to see the joy and wonder in everyone’s faces, and to have everyone asking questions and touching all the materials so enthusiastically.”

WÜD Furniture Design

Wüd Furniture Design has been in business for 15 years, creating innovative furniture that bridges the gap between elegance and practicality. The firm works with metals (encased in resin), wood, leather and more to craft fine furniture that will stand the test of taste and time. Wüd’s Keren Springer said the field trip was an opportunity to forge new connections with designers and discuss the firm’s processes and craftsmanship. “Since communication is often done over email and phone, or at a hectic tradeshow, it is always a nice change to have the trade out to our shop and showroom, where we can discuss our craft in more detail,” Keren said. “It also allowed us to showcase new finish samples and current work, and discuss possible custom projects.”

Andrea observed that Wüd is the largest of the small-scale studios they sampled on the field trip. While everything is still crafted in-house, Wüd has a somewhat more segmented process, with one person working with the resin, another working with the metal, and so on. “What they are best known for is this resin over patinated metal,” Andrea continued. “And the patinated metal can be copper, brass, bronze, zinc—and it’s a really rich, elegant material.” The metals are safely sealed away under a nonreflective surface, so the beauty remains and won’t be scratched or marred by use. While they’ve been working for over a decade with this resin under metal—calling it “Pb-R” for “lead encased in resin,” or “CrS-R” for “cold rolled steel encased in resin”—they still think of new ways and forms to use the technique.

Keren described how field trip attendees had a chance to view one of Wüd’s most popular pieces, the Tompkins sideboard, being put together in the metal shop; a zinc tabletop being patinated pre-resin; and a Gotham credenza taking shape in the woodshop. But perhaps the most impressive project in progress was a Nola island countertop in the resin shop. “Specifically, it was a hand-picked solid slab of black walnut, where the live edge meets bronze that has been cut with precision and flawlessly affixed to the curves of the live edges of the walnut,” Keren explained. “Then the bronze is cast in epoxy resin.”

A long-time admirer of Wüd, Douglas was beyond delighted to visit their studio. “To go to their space was just awesome,” he said. “They had four little boards up in their work room, and just to watch how they also continually play with the product and push its boundaries, I found fascinating.” Anthony Minichetti plans to include some of Wüd’s work in his next design project, adding that he’d love to see “an entire library customized in bronze wall panels with resin-covered bookshelves!” Beth Krupa identified Wüd as her favorite studio of the trip. “Amazing technique was applied using metals, resin and woods combined in such a beautiful way,” she exclaimed. “The founder and



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lead designer, Corey Springer, is such a talent.”

Amanda Martocchio was quite effusive in her praise as well. “I was fascinated to see Wüd’s shop and the artisans at work,” she said. “Because Wüd’s pieces combine resin, wood and ornamental metals, there is a diverse set of skills, materials and methods of fabrication all coming together. It’s really fascinating to see how it takes place under one roof. Seeing the molten resin begin to cure and be flamed before our eyes was fascinating.”

Avram Rusu Studio

An architect by training, Andreea Avram Rusu founded Avram Rusu Studio over a decade ago. She designs and assembles potent light fixtures, tables and other elements that capture a startling complexity in fresh, engaging forms. Andreea supports a thriving community of local artists and artisans by utilizing the skills of machinists, glass blowers, woodworkers and others in the New York area. And while she finishes every piece of hers in her studio, the off-site production of some elements lends her space a sense of serenity unavailable to the other workshops that feature more production activity.

Andrea Cross described Avram Rusu Studio as a “more quiet, contemplative space,” and pointed out how this more cerebral nature is reflected in Avram Rusu’s work. “She has one chandelier designed in a way that every piece of glass kind of comes out—they’re discs and they can go on and be moved,” Andrea said, describing the Confetti Glass Chandelier. “She can put it up and think about it and see if it needs to be moved again, so it’s a very different feel and more cerebral.”

Andrea confirmed they were working with her Confetti Glass Chandelier on the day of the field trip. “We were in the midst of assembling two Confetti fixtures,” she said. “The collection just went through a redesign, and we showed the first two pieces of the new versions.” Attendees also got a look at some of her jewelry-like Link Pendants, Nova collection furniture of marble and metal, Stonehenge coffee table with its thick sculptural legs of satin nickel, and a 10-foot Continuum Collection chandelier, which also features elements that can be moved into different arrangements.

Amanda observed, “It made sense that these makers, IN.SEK Design and Avram Rusu, were putting to use their architectural training to make beautiful furniture that combined both wood and concrete, and light fixtures that integrated polished plates of metal and colorful disks of glass. They were each so invested in the quality of the raw materials they used: how they were sourced and the other artisans who were producing components for them. I was struck by the passion with which they pursued their work, and their eagerness to share it with us.”

Similarly, Douglas was blown away by Andreea’s use of hand-blown glass and the inspired way she put together her light fixtures. “It reads as loose and random to some degree, but there’s actually no randomness in advance,” he pointed out. “Every single aspect of it has been completely thought out. The way her mind works and the way she’s able to put these concepts to paper before she creates them just absolutely fascinated me.”

Anthony summed it up perfectly, declaring that “Avram Rusu lighting is jewelry ready for any room to wear.”

Elevated Craft Inspires

Andrea is pleased that she was able to help her peers achieve a more direct experience with several of the finest small-scale craftsmen in NYC. Indeed, she gave her colleagues the thrill of a field trip day. She awakened curiosity and wonder in her community, so everyone can be more intentional and deliberate in seeking out and sharing these big gems of the small workshop world.

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