

RAISING THE BAR

GREAT LAKES BY
DESIGN



Terraced dunes

This contemporary home gives sculptural impression of tiered decks and angular massing, designed and built by the team of Scott Christopher Homes, Stoneberg & Gross Architects, and Gooch Design Studio LLC

VOLUME 7 | ISSUE 1 | \$10.00
GREATLAKESBYDESIGN.COM

RELISH | FORM | CREATIVE ENDEAVORS | TRAVEL

The soundtrack to life

Text: R.J. Weick

The space one inhabits, the selection of furniture and materials found within, tell a story. Each texture and object—both found and d'art—contrast and layered nuance, lend voice and language to an overall narrative regardless of architectural genre. From the quiet strength of bronze, the movement and warmth of wood, and the fragrance and sound that moves memory, to the silhouette of a chair, the gentle cast hue of a sconce, and the often-intangible presence of curated space; the things one chooses to surround themselves with can play a compelling role in expressing that story. And for Gil Melott, principal owner of Gil Melott | Studio of Chicago, Illinois, good design, often a woven tapestry of elements that speak to the emotional and the spiritual, is informed by a sense of curiosity and is always about the narrative.

"I am not unlike a lot of other designers. I think it is really important to understand the client, but I think the biggest part of my job is to tell the story. It is the story of the furniture pieces we provide or collect; it is the story of the families or of the single person who lives in the home, it is the story of what they want to build for their life," Melott said.

"My job is to help the client understand their story and renegotiate the narrative. It is about storytelling and then collecting the pieces that help communicate that, and some of them can be pieces that they own and some of it can be pieces they didn't know they would like, but they all have a thread and they are all telling the same narrative," Melott added.

Melott, who has become known for an unapologetic approach to blending disparate textures and periods, is inspired as much by the art of storytelling as he is the craft of bespoke furniture and space across luxury residential, small boutique hotels, and restaurants. Through Gil Melott | Studio, a multi-faceted creative house, the team operates at the intersection of the contemporary and rituals of the past, material expression and connection to the sensory, and an understanding of both space and client.

"We are certainly eclectic and we don't hesitate on being different or combining periods or textures or colors. We are modern—that doesn't mean we are cold—but we





are forward-thinking and modern can be very old vintage pieces set in a new place in time. We are very mindful of the space and we are mindful of the use and we are mindful of now and tomorrow. We really understand what happens in a space now, what is going to happen in 10 years from now, and then what happens when the piece is moved to another space," Melott said. "We are sort of at the nexus of all things luxury and lifestyle."

From its 1906-built, 5,000-square-foot studio defined by exposed brick, oversized windows, and original flooring, Gil Melott | Studio serves as both an interior design firm and gallery showroom in Chicago's Bucktown neighborhood. Its space is envisioned as a laboratory in which to innovate in, and as an experiential reflection of the portfolio of work the team has developed throughout the years, featuring a curation of vintage furniture, works by contemporary makers and international artists, and in-house soundtracks. Some of the international artists comprise: Steven Haulenbeek, Saxon Quinn, Julien Ru-

bat, Andrew Faris, Nick Pourfard, Howard Hersh, Sarah Dupre, Vincent Pocsik, Esther Miquel, Dan Schneiger, Fernando Bengoechea, and Matthew Fisher. The studio also represents Gil Melott | Bespoke, which is the custom furnishing and lighting design collection by Melott, where materiality, reference, and rusticity meet refinement.

"I think the most important thing about how we present ourselves as a brand or as a design studio is that we are able to live out what we profess. If we want to have a sensory experience in the homes we design, we should probably have an office or a studio space that offers up the same kind of experience," Melott said.

"We create our own in-house soundtrack every month, which part of it is some sort of obsession I have with music, but the other part of it is it does act as a creative driving force for us to have something that is really curated and gives the visitor a sense of who we are and our character. It is something that is a little more forward-thinking," Melott added.

Melott also noted the studio, which features a full, operating kitchen that often fills the space with the memory-evoking culinary aromas from inspired regions across the globe, sells select vintage pieces that will either find their way into the homes or spaces they design or those of other designers based from all over the world.

"We are fortunate enough to be able to sell them that way [to designers] who have similar aesthetics or at least a similar thought process, and then we have designed furnishings and have put them in the space and allowed them to have their moment. It is like living in a giant loft apartment and people get a sense of who we are and what their spaces could look like," Melott said.

For Melott, his own narrative begins with an affinity for the creative field nurtured by those around him his whole life, from sketching in notebooks and studying literature to cultivating an appreciation for his own story. Though design remained a passion project for him as he designed heirloom furniture pieces, worked



with local craftspeople, and flipped houses in his free time, Melott initially pursued a career in corporate advertising. It was only after he had a major heart attack in 2015 that he decided to alter the trajectory of his life.

"When you have a life-changing event like that, you really cut out all the noise," Melott said. "Design has really helped me course-correct my life, so everything I have worked on for my clients building a better home or life or experience, it has really done that for me as well. It took me out of a rat race that, for better or worse, probably would have done me in, and now it has provided me an outlet that has been incredibly rewarding. It has given me perspective on what a creative life can offer and it has given me insight to the potential of myself and the team I have created."

Launched in 2016 and informed by a respectful curiosity of people's stories, Gil Melott | Studio takes on projects that have intention, clarity, and inspiration, where the relationship between client and team is central to the design process. Melott said the studio takes on both intimate and large-scale projects, but it is ultimately about the relationships built with the client and tapping into emotion, memory, and sense to curate an inspired space.

"I grew up in Texas for the majority of my life and I spent a lot of time every summer working a ranch with my uncle and I spent a lot of time with my grandmother, who made sure that I was the owner of the story of my family. I think that was what compelled me to always be incredibly inquisitive, so when you say you like the color blue, I don't take it for face value," Melott said.

"I'll say, 'well, let's go look in your closet' and we stand there and say, 'why did you like this blue sweater' and they'll say, 'it reminds me of something I had when I was a child.' 'What was it about it when you were a child that you like that blue sweater?' And they would tell me the story of going to the park with their father and their mother. So, in my mind, there is never one answer, there is a multitude of answers that someone has an emotional response to or has a spiritual or emotional connection to, and my job is to get as many of those responses so I can either literally, or in some other way, harken back to those things," Melott added.

Since then, Gil Melott | Studio has developed a portfolio of interior spaces whose cohesive moment is in their ability to resonate on a deeper level, weaving memory and meaning into eclectic environments of classic forms, rustic materiality, and refined ambiance. Melott said when the team makes a proposal or refines a brief for a client, they think about the color, the food, the smell, and the music that is going to be in a space as much as they do about lifestyle and affinity for things like the outdoors.

"How do we translate the outdoors to the interior spaces? Are the textures reminiscent of those spaces outside? Is there a rough plane that is reminiscent of the rocks that they like to climb? Those things have a connection," Melott said.

"I think that sensory messaging, all five of the senses—six of the senses—have to be repeated in some form or fashion, because that is how people react. I think that is our design aesthetic, understanding luxury and how it translates to the lifestyle—and then connecting it to the senses," Melott added.

Those repetitions can take on tonal and textural elements as wood is applied in varying notes and colors, such as the rough, hand-hewn element of a stairway, the durability of a countertop, and the earthy warmth that is expressed in a bedroom or intimate space. That intersection of materiality, memory, and modern elevation also comes through in the studio's own furniture brand, where its LUZ lighting series brings together the weight of solid bronze, subtle illumination of light, and sculptural form in homage of sunrise or a "goodnight kiss kind of light"—a turn of phrase Melott attributes to his grandmother.

"I started designing pieces that I found missing when I was looking for them and I like to call them urban-sized, meaning they are built for city living, but they can fit in just about any environment," Melott said. "They are all based on some sort of reminiscence I had as a kid, so they tend to remind me of something I experienced."

Recently, Gil Melott | Bespoke introduced two additions to its furniture line, known as Pelota and Brazo. The Pelota lounge chair, defined by a soft, sloping seat, simple silhouette, and spherical feet, is a modern take on the wingback chair and inspired by the Spanish word for "ball." Designed with black walnut in mind for the obelisk feet, the chair is available in a number of fabrics and wood species, as well as metal for the pelota feet. The Brazo, an armchair inspired by a confident lean one often takes when sitting behind the wheel exploring back roads, is designed with a single arm, suited for conversation and contemplation. Named for the Spanish word for "arm," Brazo is available in both a right and a left arm configuration.

Melott noted his process is one that often begins with an inspired glass of wine, a client vision or design challenge—like scale or incorporating spherical feet—and iterative sketches.

"I think people are surprised by how comfortable they are, because they look rather stoic and they have a singular presence, but then people sit in them and they're like, 'I didn't expect it to be this comfortable,'" Melott said. "I love that there is an element of surprise in something designed that at a glance is pretty, but is also comfortable. I think that is what I love about it."



To Melott, the studio is an outlet where passion and talent intersect in a meaningful way that provides creative, design solutions for clients that ultimately can provide moments of happiness and delight—and when they are asked to experience that environment with the client long after the project has completed, it is a humbling and rewarding moment.

"Good design leads to a healthier living. Good design leads to a clearer mind and in some ways, it can lead to a more productive life. I see families become calmer and happier on the day-to-day, because they have reached out to me because they wanted not only a beautiful

space, but also to solve things about their life," Melott said. "They wanted a place for work and they wanted a place for respite and they wanted a place for communal living and we were able to deliver those things in quite a lovely way that they were proud of and in some instances, they wanted to repeat in the next home and I couldn't think of a better compliment."