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In this continued series, we speak to some of the architects in the region about their passion for the field, and the challenges and opportunities that inspire them

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# Patina and warmth

Text: R.J. Weick



Rebekah Zaveloff, co-founder and director of design of KitchenLab Interiors and its sister company Imparfait Design Studio of Chicago, Illinois, likes places that have soul. It is about the character, history, and warmth of time-worn elements, where vintage pieces like burlwood and goatskin tables quietly speak of the stories long polished into their surfaces. Embedded narratives of chandeliers and rugs are woven in new, cohesive threads throughout spaces, and artful juxtapositions and modern elegance live in unexpected, timeless harmony.

To her it is equally about the process as it is the finished product, where a background in the fine arts, interior design, and the hospitality sector has informed a studio approach in which each detail is thoughtfully considered throughout the entirety of the design process. It is about embracing the experiential, the hospitality and humanity of place, to curate homes with warmth and welcome, where kitchens and their adjacent spaces can serve as immersive, lived-in backdrops for daily life in which family and friends can live, linger, and want to visit time and again.

“The hospitality business is probably the biggest influence in an overall aesthetic and design philosophy; to me it’s about how a space feels more than it is about how it looks. It is about how it flows, how you walk through it, how the lighting is when you are hanging out in a room, where people gather when you are entertaining, and if there is space planning going on so people feel like they are together, but not on top of each other,” Zaveloff said. “It is also about the mood and the atmosphere. We ironically don’t do hospitality design, but hospitality hugely influences our work, because it is really about the drama and the mood and the vibe of a space more than it is just about a pretty picture.”

For the husband-and-wife team of Zaveloff and John “Nick” Nichols, co-founder and chief financial and organization officer of KitchenLab Interiors and Imparfait Design Studio, hospitality would not only serve as a catalyst for launching KitchenLab Interiors in 2004 based on a shared passion and vision for translating the dynamic ambiance of restaurant spaces for residential interiors, but also a serendipitous



first introduction. Nichols, who had dreamed of owning a restaurant given his love of culture and food, initially joined a partnership and opened the Wicker Park-based Okno in 1997. It was through this process that he discovered his own passion for design and adaptive reuse and when he set about updating another historic three-flat in Wicker Park, Zaveloff happened to walk into the building and fell in love with the gutted, raw space.

“My background is fine art and I ended up in set design for quite a few years. I walked into this building [Nichols] was gutting in Wicker Park and I was like, this is what I want to do. I want to do real stuff; not stuff you build and tear down. I had been in creative fields for many years, I had worked in set photography, but that is really what flipped the switch for me, was walking into this old building that was gutted and seeing all the beautiful old beams and the woodwork and the plaster,” Zaveloff said. “I decided to go back to school for interior design.”

Zaveloff, who first attended the University of California, Los Angeles, or UCLA, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for fine art, then went on to study interior design at the Harrington College of Design in Chicago. When she then went on to work at a kitchen design firm, she noted the typology really resonated with her due to her own prior experience working in restaurants. Based on their mutual love of food, travel, and hospitality, and a process-oriented approach to creating



memorable, experiential spaces, Zaveloff and Nichols launched KitchenLab Interiors nearly 20 years ago.

“It just dovetailed. Kitchen design just spoke to me at the time and from then on, I just made it a goal of mine to make kitchen design cool, because back then it wasn’t,” Zaveloff said. “It then evolved into interiors, so we are going into our 20th anniversary and most of our career we have done whole homes, but the name of our company has belied that a bit.”

KitchenLab Interiors is a Chicago-based interior design firm dedicated to creating warm and inviting spaces for people who love their kitchens. Since its launch, the firm quickly expanded its project base of kitchen and adjacent spaces like bathrooms and mudrooms to entire residential interiors, with its first full home remodel in 2006. Over the years, KitchenLab Interiors has developed a portfolio of work that is intended to transcend style and trend to evoke emotion and capture an ambiance in which a kitchen or space becomes the epicenter of the home that feels true to each client.

“It really impacts peoples’ lives. Your environment really affects your mood and since we spend so much time in our homes, especially post-COVID, I think we have a whole newfound appreciation for it. I’ve always said it is like the idea of having the best seat in the house in your own home, so I really strive to make that a repeating theme in all of the spaces we design,” Zaveloff said. “My husband and I see ourselves as being in the hospitality business still to this day.”

Zaveloff, whose infectious passion for the field of design comes through in conversation and in her work, also noted that her background in art covered a number of different mediums, such as sculpture, painting, printmaking, photography, and film. But it was collage work in particular that has translated directly to her day-to-day work in the design field.

“I really found myself in collage, and you can see the direct reflection between that and the work that I do, because I’m not afraid of mixing eras and I’m not afraid of mixing styles. Putting two things that are seemingly not cohesive together, the minute you put them next to each other, they create a whole new thing. I love that,” Zaveloff said. “I love traditional, more classic interior architecture with modern lighting, modern furniture, and sculptural pieces; just things that are unexpected that you wouldn’t necessarily think would play well together. That has been a big influence on me as well.”

For 20 years, the studio has refined its process and enjoys working with clients from the onset. For the team, their goal is to be the first in and last out on a project, acting as an advocate for their clients and helping build a team of highly vetted architects, contractors, engineers, and tradespeople as needed for each project. For Zaveloff, it is just as important that the cli-



ents enjoy the process as they do the final product, and really spend the time and investment in thinking through—and enjoying selections—of space planning and the intimate details.

“We all get decision fatigue and spending money fatigue, but when you are doing this for the long haul, the details, the follow through, matters,” Zaveloff said. “Usually, we are brought onto a project early. We like to put the team together and we like to figure out who the right architect, landscaper, and contractor is. Having us involved from the very beginning is critical. We don’t have to be involved in every little thing or in every meeting, but at least in terms of the basic space plans and the furniture plans to make sure everything is copacetic.”

In the case of this single-family home in Glenview, Illinois, the project was distinctive in more ways than one. Located in the scenic retreat community of Valley Lo Club, rough-

ly 20 miles north of Chicago, this project was not only the team’s first new construction home, but also coincided with the soft launch of KitchenLab Interiors’ sister company, Imparfait Design Studio. The studio, which celebrates beauty found in places and in things that endure over time, is an iterative expression and evolution of the founders’ shared vision for a culture of hospitality and creating a welcoming environment within the residential sector where details and vintage elements lend patina and warmth. It was also a project that reunited Zaveloff with a repeat client—and longtime acquaintance.

“It’s a funny story. The homeowner used to babysit me when I was little. She is from Columbus, Ohio, as am I, and our parents were friends and knew each other. I had helped her with her kitchen in her prior home and she’s truly one of my biggest fans, and really understands that we do things differently,” Zaveloff



said. “She was an art history major, her mom was an art dealer, so she looks at a lot of work and sees how ours is different, how we try to avoid trends, and really do things that are more timeless and emotionally connected.”

Initially, the clients had anticipated they would keep the existing home onsite when purchasing the waterfront property, but when they discovered issues like mold in the structure, they had to pivot and look at doing a new build. The clients worked with GTH Ar-

chitects, an architectural firm based in Northbrook, Illinois, to realize a lakefront home that would suit their lifestyle needs and then looked to bring Zaveloff into the process to help curate an interior that merged a casual, modern comfort with the vintage narrative.

“I was beyond impressed. I think one of the few things we did was close up one window and then add another window, that was about it, and that is pretty unusual. The original foundation of the architecture was pretty great. They

had spent a lot of time on it—the flow, the layout, the size of the kitchen—it all made a lot of sense,” Zaveloff said.

“The client knew she wanted us involved and that is very flattering. I mean, if someone buys a house with the intention of knowing exactly who they are going to hire as their designer, there is no bigger compliment,” Zaveloff said.

Realized by the collaborative team of Imparfait Design Studio, GTH Architects, John Carey Construction of Elmhurst, Illinois, and

Breezy Hill Nursery Inc. of Salem, Wisconsin, this single-family home is intended to evoke the casual warmth of a waterfront vacation destination imbued with the artful juxtapositions and fearless styles of Zaveloff and the client. Featuring vintage pieces and a keen eye for the stories in art and objects, this 5,000-square-foot home set on a 28-acre lake is intentionally nestled into its landscape to take advantage of its natural views. While the main floor provides an elevated perspective, its lower level engages directly with its site, creating that visual and often intangible relationship between indoor and outdoor environments. It presents a dialogue, a conversation, that is as much about the Farrow and Ball Hague Blue cabinetry—a deep and dramatic colored woodwork—in the lower-level entertainment kitchen and its relationship to the sconces, wicker, and artwork as it is the organic palette of blues, woods, and greens beyond the French doors.

“The architects took great pains to make a really beautiful home that doesn’t feel like a ranch with a walk-out basement, but that is in effect what it is,” Zaveloff said.

Underlying the casual comfort of lakefront living is a deep appreciation for the late ’70s, early ’80s bohemian and disco glam, in which organic materials, reupholstered Milo Baughman chairs, and brutalist-inspired light fixtures are layered in intentional harmony. Castlewood Oak floors in Chatelaine, with its rich knots, mineral streaks, and natural splits of heirloom hardwood; Crown Major by Nemo chandeliers, with their contemporary, versatile design inspired by ancient forms and snowflakes; and vintage chairs come together with custom rift-cut, white oak millwork, artistic tile, brass hardware, and sculptural art.

“It’s new construction, but the first word that comes to me is the word nostalgic. It summarizes everything, from the fact that I’ve known her since I was little, to the houses that we grew up in, and the furniture that our parents owned. Both of our moms were pretty stylish for their era,” Zaveloff said. “There was a bit of nostalgia there and it was really sweet and fun to collaborate like that. Almost everything in the house is vintage except for the upholstery pieces and even some of those are reupholstered, so the sofas in the living room and the banquette in the dining room are new, but everything else is vintage.”

Imparfait Design Studio provided interior architecture, space planning, interior design, furnishings, and finishes for the project, and also worked with the client on exterior finish selections such as the stucco and stone, roof and paint colors, and windows and doors. Zaveloff noted their shared love of the ’70s and for that vintage discovery was an ideal fit for the project, and the client’s willingness to take risks and trust the design team was something she did not take for granted.



“The fact that the house feels nostalgic, because of those vintage pieces, where each piece was really thoughtfully purchased, makes it feel like there is a history that a new house often doesn’t have, so in order to imbue a new construction home with that level of history, is hard. It takes time to select pieces that are meaningful and often vintage in order to create that lived-in and layered feel,” Zaveloff said.

“Design means paying attention. It is how a space feels. It is the combination of thought-

fulness and being able to sit in a space and consider it. What excites me about interior design is when homes have character and warmth, rather than just being pretty. The idea that it is very personal and has character is one of my favorite parts of this house. Everything in the house has a story, a saga, like the client’s husband said. I mean, that pretty much sums it up. Each piece we found is meaningful and has a story that can be shared,” Zaveloff added