



DESIGN MASTERS

► These three Portlanders have shown a lifelong commitment to their craft and have each made lasting contributions in the fields of architecture, interior design, and homebuilding. Plus, six rising stars who display equal vision and staying power. *Portraits by Daniel Root*



Interior architect Mirza Dickel in Salena Johnson's living room, where light (natural and otherwise), textiles, and color create sophisticated warmth.

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MIRZA DICKEL

MASTER INTERIOR ARCHITECT

STEP INTO SALENA JOHNSON'S KINGS HILL CONDOMINIUM and it's not hard to understand why designer Mirza Dickel has been asked to create interiors for Portland's most venerable families for more than half a century. The silk roman shades, through which warm light is cast; the chamfered baseboard moldings; and the bespoke shoji doors join to form a timeless, unified whole. But don't look for a signature style. Dickel works strictly in response to her clients' lifestyles. "One thing I have always felt very strongly about," says the 86-year-old Portland native, "is that I never repeat anything."

Though not a household name, Dickel nevertheless is well known among the local cognoscenti, having collaborated with the most important names in Northwest architecture as well as internationally known textile firms Fortuny and Bruntschwig & Fils. She was one of a select group of national designers invited by DuPont to craft spaces in the Pavilion of American Interiors at the 1964 World's Fair in New York. HGTV's Joe Ruggiero calls Dickel "the Sister Parish of the Northwest," referring to the late, influential East Coast interiors maven known for her work in the White House. "Mirza is one of my favorite designers," he says.

Dickel earned her BS in interior architecture in 1947 from the University of Oregon's School of Architecture and Allied Arts. And as architects like Pietro Belluschi, John Yeon, John Storrs, and later Walter Gordon and C. Gilman "Gil" Davis carved out a regionally inflected Modernism, Dickel worked alongside them, creating fresh interiors for the contemporary Northwest life. As rigorous and innovative in her thinking as her better-known colleagues, she has always been willing to, as Ezra Pound admonished, "make it new." She installed the first leather floor in Oregon and early on chose cork floors for their ease and durability. She used low-voltage lighting when it was new technology, embracing it for the flattering light it cast. "I hate to use the words 'good taste,' but she has had a lot of style in the way she has done things," says interior designer Henry Brown. "Those early architects Mirza worked with developed



The Rising Star

DAVID LAUBENTHAL

DJL STUDIO

When David Laubenthal turned in his first assignments to his architecture professors at Arizona State University, they joked that he should be studying art, not architecture. "They thought my designs were a little more grandiose than they needed to be," he remembers. Within a year he'd transferred to the fine arts program and had started studying sculpture.

That degree helped land him a gig as a sculptor for Michael Curry Design in Scappoose for 10 years. Eventually, Laubenthal's growing desire to transform salvaged materials into functional products led him to launch his own design and fabrication business, DJL Studio, in 2001. He's managed a steadily growing number of ambitious commissions since then, including furnishings for business consultancy Percipio's minimalist Gotham Building offices and a striking steel, ceramic, and tile baobab tree sculpture at NE 18th Avenue and Alberta Street. "David is really courageous with materials," says mosaic artist Ruth Frances Greenberg, who collaborated with him on the baobab's design. "He seems to be able to render anything

in any material—I don't know many artists like that."

Laubenthal has sculpted a canoe from fiberglass and silk, built a reception desk from woven steel and maple wood, and crafted a horse from cement, hemp burlap, and graphite—but his current obsession lies in repurposing wood from a single, unlikely source: discarded shipping pallets. His Portland Pallet Project reincarnates the abundant structures as tree-stump-shaped stools, the only evidence of the wood's past life betrayed by an occasional scar or nail. A testament to Laubenthal's considerable sculpting talent, his Stumpt stools look as fitting in a grassy field as they do in Nike's über-Modernist design studio, where 10 of them currently reside. "A lot of these pallets are put together with some pretty exotic hard and soft woods," he says. "They've traveled all over the world only to be discarded here. I love that I can give them a second life."

—*Sloan Schang*

● Chad Wykhuis (from left), Jake Gundersen, and Kris Wallace



▲ The Rising Star

ORANGE DESIGN INDUSTRIES

Rising like a patchwork quilt on N Mississippi Avenue, the ReBuilding Center is Portland's inspirational mecca for salvage building. It's also a showcase for the gifted problem-solvers behind three-year-old company Orange Design Industries. The warehouse windowscape and attached offices of the center's umbrella organization, Our United Villages, were stitched together from 90 percent reclaimed materials and feature clever touches like partitions made from discarded doors and windows, shingles fabricated from old heating ducts, and more than 200 solid-core wood doors reused as flooring.

"The only thing we gave [Orange] was a blueprint showing where the walls needed to be," says Our United Villages founder Shane Endcott. "They improvised every day with whatever materials came into the warehouse."

Orange's three partners—Chad Wykhuis, Jake Gundersen, and Kris Wallace—have backgrounds as motley as the ReBuilding Center's inventory. Since college, the three men have done everything from driving double-decker tour buses to electrical engineer-

ing, boatbuilding, naturopathy, and lots of carpentry.

Along the way they gathered a skilled crew and enough green-building passion and know-how to dream up and hammer out some of Portland's most innovative salvage projects, among them a whimsical office addition for Sunnyside Elementary, the ecoroof-capped remodel of a daylight ranch home for local landscape designer Pat Lando, and the SE Hawthorne Boulevard outpost of Por Qué No taqueria. Orange calls its work "a ripened interpretation of green"—an apt description for a team that once reused material from a downtown racquetball court as flooring in a house remodel, and that has recently been enlisted to design and build two "living buildings," which will generate their own energy with renewable resources. "We really feel like we can change the way people think about construction," says Wykhuis. "That starts with just showing them what's possible."

—Sloan Schang

▼ For Johnson's home, Dickel had a free-standing glass shower fabricated and installed; the glass allows the bathroom's rich, papered walls to envelop the space.

a whole different way of approaching residences that really suited living in the Northwest. Prior to that people were living in traditional Colonial or Georgian homes. Mirza was one of the leaders in bringing that modern feel to Portland."

In her compartment, Dickel is a bridge to another era, one in which decorators, as they were then called, were followed in the newspapers. In a mid-1960s press scrapbook for the American Institute of Interior Designers, Dickel is photographed in smart suits and smarter hats at home shows, lectures, and events like the opening of Pittock Mansion. But while decorators were in the papers, their projects were not. Dickel's professional discretion—of a level one might expect from the family physician or attorney—remains a point of pride. On a recent day, her geometric print blouse and black slacks were accented with a striking black-and-white Bakelite necklace. Now as then, Dickel's elegant bearing—as refined as her many interiors—sets her apart.

Her sure hand has touched not only the residences of Portland families like the Dants, the Zells, and the Vollums but a number of historically significant Oregon buildings as well. In the '60s, when Dickel, as president of the Portland chapter of the American Institute of Interior Designers, was looking for a way to give back to the community, she learned of the Bybee-Howell House on Sauvie Island. It was during the restoration of that historic home that she worked closely with Wallace Kay Huntington, an accomplished landscape architect, architectural historian, and longtime friend. "He and Mirza were two peas in a pod in terms of interests and talent," says architect and friend Marvin Witt.

After Bybee, Huntington convinced Dickel to collaborate on another restoration project: the 1859 William Case House near Champoege. On the National Register of Historic Places, the barn-



▼ *Moving Johnson's fireplace away from the wall required a great deal of ingenuity. "I get an idea in my head, and I get determined," Dickel says.*

red Greek Revival home with its distinctive wraparound porch (it has 31 Doric columns) was a disaster when Huntington purchased it. With the thoroughness and inventiveness that she brings to all of her projects, Dickel labored with architect Gil Davis to restore the home as accurately as possible—carefully scraping paint away to discover original colors like the living room cabinets' yellow ocher—while making the space livable by installing heat and electricity. Her decision to hide the modern refrigerator in a nook off the kitchen is a typically clever solution. The project garnered a 1979 American Institute of Architects (AIA) preservation award for Davis (who insisted that Dickel's name be added to the award); on a more personal note, it also resulted in Huntington and Dickel's marriage. They live in the Case House to this day.

Dickel's abilities translate equally well to far less storied spaces. For the Northwest Portland townhouse of cookbook author Sara Perry, Dickel infused the boxy, generic Modernist interior with "good bones," beginning with a custom entry staircase of elegant proportions and contemporary sculptural window casings. Throughout, Dickel modified the standard-issue floor plan to fit Perry's lifestyle, which centers on a massive 15th-century dining room table that once sat in Hearst Castle. Dickel spent long hours on the geometry of a wall of built-in cabinets to contain Perry's extensive dish and glassware collections.

Dickel's position in the firmament of Portland interiors cannot be underestimated, even as her work carried her to the Oregon Coast, San Francisco, and beyond. As architect Dorothy Payton put it, "Mirza Dickel was instrumental in establishing interior design as a profession in Portland." Dickel's staying power, according to long-time friend and noted finish artist Ron Wagner, has been in large part because "her clients wouldn't let her retire." —**Lisa Radon**

▼ *This sculptural soffit in Sara Perry's home adds architectural interest and dramatic lighting to the living room entrance.*

