



WHAT STARTED AS A VISION
BECAME A MISSION. DETERMINED
TO BUILD A STORE UNLIKE
ANY OTHER IN THE WORLD,
RESTORATION HARDWARE CREATED
ITS OWN FIELD OF DREAMS.

“IF YOU BUILD IT...”



Clockwise, right:
The Soho Living Room;
the Rooftop Garden and
Conservatory at sunset;
the Rooftop Garden and
Conservatory; a bedroom
and bath vignette.

FROM A DISTANCE, IT LOOKS LIKE A STATELY EUROPEAN VILLA AT HOME IN TUSCANY. BUT RESTORATION HARDWARE'S NEW GALLERY IN HOUSTON, WHICH OPENED IN NOVEMBER 2011, IS MUCH MORE THAN A NOBLE BUILDING.

“It is the first from-the-ground-up new expression of our brand,” says the company’s Chairman and co-CEO Gary Friedman.

It’s called a Gallery, Friedman says, “because it embodies the artistic values the company prizes. We’ve created an artful expression of home furnishings in a gallery setting. It’s an abstraction of home furnishings designed to push the imagination and the mind.”

Inside the Gallery, located in Highland Village, are special areas that punctuate the space dedicated to sensory experiences: the Bellocq Tea Atelier, with freshly brewed artisanal teas, a Fresh Floral Boutique by floral designer Miriam Habib, an International Design Bibliotheque where customers can peruse design books and magazines from around the globe, and, crown-ingly, the 7,000-square-foot Rooftop Garden and Conservatory, where outdoor furniture is showcased among Mission olive trees and trickling fountains in a sanctuary of calm.

A look behind the scenes at the creation of this dramatic structure suggests the organic and, at times, unorthodox methods employed to bring the building to life. It’s a story of the Restoration Hardware team’s relentless search for the expression of its ideas. And time and again in the design process, the challenges became inspirations and obstacles generated innovations.

Friedman enlisted long-time collaborators, residential and commercial architects Howard Backen and Jim Gillam of Backen, Gillam & Kroeger Architects, and retail concept designer, Richard Altuna. “I love working with Howard, Jim and Richie,” Gary stated. “They are old world guys. They bring out the pencil and sketch by hand. They are so well educated in historical architecture. And yet they

can look forward.” Friedman also tapped international lighting designer Ross De Alessi, widely acclaimed for illuminating the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco and the Washington Monument. Landscape architect Rick Scheen created the park-like setting.

The designers have known each other for years. “It’s fun when we get together for a meeting to review the work,” Altuna says. “But Gary and I also like to work late at night. At two or three in the morning we would be faxing sketches back and forth.”

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In the beginning, “the building was just an empty shell,” says Jim Gillam. The team regarded it as “a found object” and decided to transform and reinvent it into something else – not a mall store but a real building.

It was during one of those late-night faxing sessions that an idea for transforming the building emerged. “We have many products with historical references that are given a fresh point of view and put in a new context,” notes Gary. They soon came to the conclusion that the building should be treated as a villa – an estate, inspired by the principles of the Renaissance architect Palladio, whose symmetrical rules of architecture have been used by generations of designers ever since.

Altuna continues, “Jim is a student of architectural history. Howard is less of a traditionalist. He has his own style, which is more modernist. So together we came up with something new – a modern interpretation of a Palladian villa. That’s when it started to get really thrilling and unpredictable.”

The transformative process began at the entrance of the Gallery. In the Palladian form of the villa, the entrance is often a circular court. Howard and Jim explored the idea of using such a space as the main entrance, focused on the two striking 14-foot gates.

“It is a transitional area,” Gary says, “setting the stage for the spaces inside the gallery. It carries you from the busy world of daily life outside to a soothing refuge. You feel a change. It is of today but it pays homage to history.”

Jim thought of the elliptical space as a room open to the sky, what the Romans called an oculus, or window in the ceiling. That became the name everyone used. But because of the shape and location of the building, there was not enough space for a full circle. So, sketching and experimenting, Jim and Howard tried to squeeze the circle in and drew an ellipse or oval instead. They liked it; the shape had its own charm and character. It was more welcoming than a circle would have been. Difficulty had pushed creativity.

The team also knew they wanted inside and outside to communicate. Balconies, windows, arched doorways and French doors bring them into contact. Flowing from the oculus space, the central court and three-story, grand double staircase – 37 feet wide at one point – are flooded with light from a long skylight 65-feet overhead. “You can orient yourself from that staircase,” says Jim. “You understand the floor plan.”

Palladio’s ideas inform the building’s symmetrical layout. This feels intuitively right to Friedman. “I don’t know what it is, but I have a kind of embedded chip that makes me want things balanced and symmetrical,” he says.



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