

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

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# The bespoke moments

Text: R.J. Weick

“The way that you shape your space, the way that you choose to edit and collect and design your environment, impacts your visual and impacts the function. You can’t help but notice something that is well-organized, well-edited, or well-curated, it is like it comes with a feeling of thoughtfulness. You walk into a space and you can tell if it was thoughtfully pulled together,” said Laura O’Brien, owner of O’Brien Harris LLC of Chicago, Illinois.

“For us, in a kitchen space, the struggle is trying to create beauty in the midst of function—and sometimes in the midst of chaos, because these rooms can get very chaotic—and we really try to lead our clients to edit out, because our lives become part of the picture, too, with our people and everything that is happening. We really try to take a step back and simplify as much as we can, because that layer of life is going to happen,” O’Brien added.

It is that harmony, that rhythm, and that

flow of space that has in-part defined O’Brien Harris as a design partner in the interior space, guiding their clients’ vision into carefully unified expressions of bespoke furniture, artisanal craftsmanship, pure lines, and tailored sophistication. It is also in-part the company’s ability to manufacture, craft, and deliver heirloom furniture informed by a dedication to heritage, skill, and materiality, where the grain, the weight, and the finish of ethically sourced woods become an enduring moment in the built environment.

Founded by Laura O’Brien and Peter Harris, principal, both renowned designers in their own right, O’Brien Harris brings together the ideals of uncompromising American craftsmanship and timeless British sensibility, melding the rich furniture heritage of Great Britain and America. The company, which manufactures handmade bespoke cabinetry for interior spaces from its workshop in what was once known as Furniture City, or Grand Rapids, Michigan, specializes in the curation of space in

kitchens, baths, libraries, and butler’s pantries that ultimately transform their clients’ lives.

“I love that when we are gone, when our project is over, that every day someone wakes up and uses that space, that you’ve left a lasting impression on that family and everyone who comes into that home,” O’Brien said. “The transformative quality of what we do in a renovation and the transformative quality even in what we create out of nothing in new construction excites me, and the fact that it is touching peoples’ lives and families.”

For nearly 15 years, O’Brien Harris has built a portfolio of work defined by a palette of hardwoods like oak, walnut, and hand-painted maple, all hand-finished as cabinetry, paired with precision in details like dovetail joints, measured proportions, and complementary elements of satin brass hardware, custom metal hood fabrication, and marble countertops. From the modern farmhouse featuring white oak cabinetry, brass accents, and textural,

hand-waxed furniture, to the bold contrasts of hand-painted, charcoal cabinetry with burnished brass accents and custom hood of an urban apartment, to the French-inspired romance of a manor that brought together the traditional and the timeless in oakwood cabinets and crown molding, O'Brien noted the company takes on projects in a lot of different architectural or design genres.

"We do some traditional work, we do some more modern work, we do some things in the middle, and I think that is in part what keeps it interesting. You are painting on a different canvas all the time and then dealing with a different story every time, a different family every time," O'Brien said.

With its manufacturing arm, O'Brien Harris also oversees the entirety of the design process, as custom environments begin with the construction of the cabinetry themselves and culminate into executed vision. It is an aspect O'Brien noted makes the company unique in the design space and a challenge that keeps things interesting and inspiring even after her 25 years of experience in the industry.

"You are learning something new every day. A lot of people come to us specifically for our wood finishing—we tend to have a depth and a layering to the finishes we create that you don't often see in kitchen cabinetry. You might see it in a piece of furniture, but a piece of furniture is made of maybe 200 pieces or 400 pieces and a kitchen is thousands of pieces of wood," O'Brien said.

"What you can create in a piece of furniture is not always repeatable in mass, so we have been fortunate to have some really good expert finishers who can bring that furniture-like quality of finish into the environment. I think you see that in this kitchen too, in that really beautiful walnut. Not everybody can do it, so we are really happy that we can," O'Brien added.

The kitchen in reference, located on a wooded site in Illinois, was part of a custom home, new construction project. Designed by Michael Abraham Architecture of Clarendon Hills, Illinois and built by Tiburon Homes LLC of Hinsdale, Illinois for clients who envisioned a modern-inspired home contextual of its surrounding natural landscape with the kitchen serving as a vital component of the overall experience. Having worked with both architect and builder on previous projects, O'Brien Harris was brought into the design and build process on referral early on during pre-construction.

While a little more modern than what O'Brien Harris often deals with, O'Brien noted the client really wanted to have an organic feel to the space in terms of materials and bring the outdoor environment into the home. Featuring an open concept and a lot of glass, the home opens outward to the landscaped terraces and outdoor pool on the wooded site, and the kitchen—which was an integral element of the cli-





ent's vision of being able to entertain their family and large groups of people—was informed by both the thoughtful scale and volume that reflected its interior architecture, and an organic warmth that came through in the solid walnut where the grain evokes movement and life.

"This family in particular has a very large nuclear family, so there are a lot of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, and this home was going to be the gathering place for that. So, really getting into that function and making sure that if there are 40 family members there for a Sunday meal, that everything was going to work and function, everything had a place," O'Brien said.

"The kitchen space in particular that we were dealing with was a little challenging. We really wanted to make sure that the kitchen felt like part of the architecture, so tying it into certain ceiling details, bringing the ceiling down at a certain point so that it really felt like an architectural envelope that we were in. This was about really integrating it into the structure," O'Brien added.

To address the need for ample storage space within an open concept that featured only two walls, O'Brien Harris designed a nearly 15-foot, linear peninsula to comple-

ment the central island in the kitchen. Featuring double-sided storage, the peninsula provides a thoughtful solution with dedicated space for serveware. The peninsula also leads to a bar area, where tall elements are intentionally tucked into ceiling details for scale and curation of space located opposite the glass wall adjacent the pool, and features additional storage space and integrated refrigeration.

"When you are in the space, it feels very open. You can see all these beautiful, floor-to-ceiling glass doors and walls to outside, but the amount of storage that is available in this peninsula piece is pretty tremendous. The family throws these very beautiful outdoor parties, so where do you store all of that stuff when you don't have a lot of wall space to do that? How do you create it?" O'Brien said.

There is also an additional behind-the-scenes pantry space that provides storage for spices and dry goods to support the family's lifestyle and affinity for the culinary. O'Brien noted it is intended as more of an intimate space for the family rather than designated for entertaining, and when it came to the overall composition of the spaces, there is a balance, beauty, and sense of breath.

"I mean, it is a beautiful picture. It is a beau-

tiful composition. Things are balanced, that metal hood is just this really soft kind of patinaed finish, but what makes it really cool to me is just how that wood is still alive and breathing and changing," O'Brien said. "Materials themselves have their own story and I just feel like you get to know a client and you get to know the environment that they are trying to create and it leads you to a solution that seems right—a painted finish versus this solid wood finish versus a high gloss finish."

It is a canvas that tempers an organic, rich warmth with a neutral presence, allowing the outdoor environment to reflect light throughout its spaces and pull views into the home. The stainless custom hood designed and fabricated by O'Brien Harris is complete with bronze strapping and complemented by bronze-finished hardware, faucets in a gunmetal finish, and Bianca Perla countertops that cascade over the rich depth of walnut on the peninsula and island. Finished in a very natural stain, the solid walnut grain can also be found on the door, which as O'Brien noted, continues to evolve and change over time.

"We went back and forth with a really beautiful walnut veneer and we ended up doing a solid walnut planked door. That is pretty un-



usual, it is difficult to manufacture, it is difficult to keep stable, and it is more expensive, but at the end of the day, the client and everybody on the team really felt that you could tell the difference. Veneers come from trees, but it is just a different layer,” O’Brien said.

“The wood changes over time, it oxidizes, it becomes different colors over time, and while

that process for the most part has stopped, anytime I go into that house, you can just really feel that it is a living thing still. It’s a very organic moment and I do lots of beautiful kitchens and I don’t often get that feeling. So, to me, that is what really makes it special,” O’Brien added.

There are also additional Wolf, Sub-Zero appliances in the bar area, which features a stone countertop, four ovens—convection, steam, and two regular—a prep sink and a main sink, and oversized light fixtures that lend a softened curved silhouette to the crisp lines. The fixtures were sourced by Hickman Design Associates, a Chicago-based interior design firm specializing in residential spaces, which also provided design services on the project.

For O’Brien, her affinity for residential projects comes from the time shared with clients, the intimate experience of getting to know them, and the recognition that the spaces the team designs for those clients and their families will resonate and endure as transformative and supportive spaces.

“It was a really fun project and we are looking forward to maybe doing another project with this family,” O’Brien said.