

THE CUSTOM BUILD

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Up North coastal

This graceful, coastal-style estate is defined by a curation of details, realized by the team of Eastmark Construction, Sears Architects, and Jean Stoffer Design of Michigan

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The edited space

Text: R.J. Weick

O'Brien Harris LLC, renowned maker of bespoke cabinetry headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, was founded on principles of authenticity, integrity, craft heritage, and functional beauty. For 17 years, the woman-owned company has embraced those tenets to ensure each client the team collaborates with is left with a hearth-and-home that resonates and supports their everyday life. It is in the intentional balance of harmony and rhythm, a keen eye for the edited space, and the precision of lines and proportions that has in-part defined the O'Brien Harris portfolio, in which the tradition of heirloom furniture comes through in the hand feel of finish and the visual presence of materiality across spaces like kitchens and baths, butler's pantries and paneled libraries.

For Laura O'Brien, owner of O'Brien Harris, the success of a project comes down to the thoughtful curation of space that truly speaks

to the reciprocal relationship between user and the built environment—and it is the company's unyielding commitment to quality and timeless design that helps those homes stand the test of time in a way that frames clients' lives in a meaningful way.

"I have a natural ability to take a space and transform it into something both beautiful and highly functional—something that is touched on a daily basis," O'Brien said. "For me, design is about thoughtfully curated decisions, always with a strong focus on how the space will be used. The people who live in and experience a room ultimately determine its success, so truly understanding our clients and carefully curating every detail to support their needs is incredibly satisfying."

Established in 2009, O'Brien Harris brings a timeless sensibility with traditional American craftsmanship to bespoke cabinetry as a design



partner for interior spaces across new build and renovation. Over the years, its emphasis on the tailored and the artisanal has been translated into a skilled process that includes fresh-cut hardwood and hand-finished cabinetry pieces across style and space. The company is backed by a dedicated team and its 20,000-square-foot workshop based in Grand Rapids, Michigan—a city known for its history in the furniture industry—and has since expanded to a third location in Petoskey, Michigan.

"It's interesting to see how much the industry has changed since 2009, particularly with the rise of social media. The sheer volume of information available to clients—what they can see, save, and experience—is greater than ever, and much of that is incredibly positive. Clients can now communicate visually in a very clear way—'Here's my Pinterest board,' or 'Here's something I saw on Instagram that inspired me.' In that sense, it's a powerful tool," O'Brien said.

"At the same time, all of that access can sometimes feel overwhelming or even paralyzing," O'Brien added. "I wouldn't say the business itself has changed, but the amount of information surrounding it has made it more important than ever for us to communicate a clear vision and filter out the noise. That's true across the industry. There's so much content out there—some of it presented as good design, but often it's simply trend-driven. Our role is to sift through that and guide clients toward something truly timeless."

O'Brien, who has had an affinity for math and for the arts since she was young, became interested in the design field after taking an interior design class in high school. Intrigued by the possibility of a career that was both creative and technical—a vocation that dealt with space planning, organizational acuity, and math—O'Brien said she began to explore different paths related to interior design from hospitality and restaurant spaces to facility design and interior architecture.

"My dad was an accountant, and I always had a very strong math brain. I started interviewing different professionals as I started my college career studying interior design, learning about how you could take this creative degree and what you could do with it, but I wasn't quite sure if it was the right path," O'Brien said.

"I interviewed somebody who ran an Italian cabinetry company that came to our university and they did these presentations on what was—at the time—very focused on kitchen design, talking about how his company worked and what his designers did, and it just kind of clicked for me," O'Brien added.

O'Brien attended Illinois State University, focusing on studies in interior residential, kitchen design, and millwork, and then worked in Chicago at a high-end bespoke cabinet maker right out of college. It was while at that com-



pany O'Brien said she was able to learn a lot about the process and credits its dedication to the artisanal craft that would later help inform the founding principles behind O'Brien Harris.

"I was fortunate to be a part of a young organization that was growing and learning in real time, and I had the opportunity to touch nearly every aspect of the business—from manufacturing and marketing to design. While my role was client-facing and design-focused, I gained a deep understanding of how the entire operation functioned and what it truly takes to build a successful company," O'Brien said. "Witnessing that level of artisan craftsmanship in the first half of my career profoundly shaped my vision. It clarified my commitment to building a business grounded in exceptional quality and timeless design."

For her, it is that puzzle, the solution of design that truly drives her in every project, taking the time to get to know her clients early on in the process, whether new build or renovation, to help shape or re-shape space to reflect and support how they live. While she noted it was a very strange time to launch a new business amid the economic downturn of 2008—with two young children at the time—it has been a challenge she has loved, and brings that passion for collaborative, innovative, and inclusive solutions to each and every project.

"I would put our projects in two different categories. One is new construction, where there is an architect and there is a team of people creating something from a piece of land, a piece of paper, that will become a home. The other aspect of my job is renovation, so a client

has an existing home and might want to add onto it or just need to reconfigure it," O'Brien said. "In either instance, there is a very early need, especially in a kitchen space, to understand that, 'Yes, this house is looking beautiful from the outside,' and 'Yes, it has the right amount of bedrooms and bathrooms,' but when we drill into the space, is it going to satisfy what that family needs?"

In new construction, that often means meeting with the clients very early on while design work is still in the rough floorplan phase. O'Brien said it is important to get to know the clients, learn how they plan to use the space, what their family is like, and what their entertaining needs will be—and at times, the team can tell right away if the space is going to work or if there is not enough room in a certain area.





“Or this connectivity here is a little odd between one space and another space. It’s really getting the boots on the ground early and having an eye on flow and function, which in my opinion is one of the keys to a successful project in the end,” O’Brien said.

“The same goes for renovation projects, which, truth be told, are my favorite,” O’Brien added. “You can take the same house—the same footprint—and by simply moving a wall or opening up a space, without even adding square footage, completely transform it. The impact that transformation has on the people who live there—how it improves their daily experience—is incredibly meaningful. It is my favorite part of the job when we can solve all the things that have been bothering a client who has been living in a home for two or three or 15 years.”

The translation of those needs is a skill she has honed over the years and often comes from asking a lot of questions. It is in distilling what

it is about a certain image that moves a client, identifying the aesthetic and personality through the way a client might dress, or discovering the root memory behind a love or dislike of a certain hardware style or beamed ceiling piece.

“What colors do they wear to meetings? Are they very simply dressed and have a great piece of jewelry? Or is it more of a designer statement? Like, who are they as a person and sometimes how you dress and how you come into meetings—those are little clues to me about whether they might like a more tailored look or whether they want fun colors,” O’Brien said.

“The funnel that it then goes through is me and hopefully I can edit out the noise and there is a back-and-forth. I always tell the clients it is very rare if you love every aspect of what I present the first time. It is usually 80- to-90 percent, and that last 10 percent is your personality coming through, the little tweaks that you know you want. I have to be both muse and filter,” O’Brien added.

While industry and client knowledge have evolved over the years, O’Brien Harris’ commitment to timeless design and quality craftsmanship has not. It is perhaps the relationship between the two that has helped the company weather rising costs and the economic waves, particularly considering how expensive some of the materials have become, according to O’Brien. It is important to the team that the bespoke work that goes into their clients’ spaces—often important and central rooms of the home—reflect the investment in beautiful, functional pieces that endure.

“If you are doing a kitchen renovation or a bathroom renovation, there are so many trades that touch that space—electricians, plumbers, flooring people, tile people, cabinet people, countertop people—and the sum of those parts is always a big number. It’s really important to me that we leave a project with an impression and an aesthetic that in 20 years you can walk into and still appreciate its beauty and quality.

The quality of what we do and the timeless presentation of that is first and foremost, unwavering,” O’Brien said.

As O’Brien Harris looks to its own upcoming two-decade-milestone, the company has expanded its project footprint beyond the Great Lakes-Midwest region to places like Jackson Hole, Wyoming and Palm Beach, Florida. O’Brien said the company is becoming more nationally recognized and the idea of expanding its location network is exciting, but it is important to her that the company remains true to its founding design principles, namely that the work is very personal and not a formula to be replicated without intentional thought. It is a careful approach that reflects the ethos of the company, particularly when it comes to kitchens.

“Kitchens have an additive quality that’s exponentially greater than any other room in the house. So much happens there—food preparation and presentation, storage, the tools and accessories behind the function, and, of course, family life. It’s easy to get caught up in loving a particular detail and wanting to layer it in, but for me, thoughtful editing is essential. By pulling back, we create space for real life to unfold—for movement, for a bit of chaos, for people gathering and cooking together. That balance is what makes a kitchen truly successful,” O’Brien said.



“Having a quietly beautiful background allows the room to be full of life, full of people, and full of all that color without competing with it. That is the only way I can describe it. It is not competing for attention. The atten-

tion in the space is the life that is happening there, and there is just this beautiful simplicity—detailed, well-done, well-appointed, and enduring,” O’Brien added.



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