

METROPOLIS



ARCHITECTURE AND
DESIGN AT ALL SCALES
October 2017

New Talent

Five Design Innovators to Watch

Alexander Girard's Unseen Photography

MoMA Takes On Fashion

How the Guggenheim Got Built

Playing with

What's the most important life lesson a design student can learn? You could make a case for highly conceptual theories about inspiration or creative flow. But what students at the Rochester Institute of Technology experience in a senior seminar called Metaproject is a dose of market reality: It's not always about big ideas, but about how you meet a need.

Every year, Professor Josh Owen, who chairs RIT's industrial design department, invites a manufacturer to share a specific challenge it's facing in an upcoming product line. For Umbra, the Toronto-based housewares company that worked with Owen's students this year, the problem was "designing for small spaces." Once the objective is assigned, students immerse themselves in the company's previous design collections, studying everything from aesthetics to viable price points. Then they spend their semester crafting prototypes that can fit stylishly and seamlessly into the firm's next line. "We're not just making stuff," says Owen. "We want to add value."

At the end of each Metaproject—and there have been seven so far—partnering companies sponsor a booth at ICFF each spring. There, students play the part of freelance designers and talk up their products to passersby. For some students, like Afifi Ishak, who created a dodecahedron sticky-note memo ball for Poppin during last year's Metaproject, the whole experience turns into something even more exciting than a life lesson: his first product on the market.

By Audrey Gray

the Pros

Metaproject 07



01

Student: Brian Cusack

Project: Saddlebag Organizer

Umbra challenged RIT seniors to design for micro-living, and Cusack tapped his experience as a student to create an accent piece fit for a small dorm room or apartment. His adjustable saddlebag organizer can be layered over desks, tables, or even doors, creating extra storage capacity in unlikely spaces.



02

Student: Tadhg Duffy

Project: Popup Room Divider

Duffy was able to identify and satisfy a huge need in small rooms: privacy. His Popup Room Divider uses the same materials as expandable photo reflectors, with a compact, retractable stand for stability. Suddenly, one small room becomes two, he says, "whenever the mood strikes."



03

Student: Pauline Dziama

Project: Power Bucket

Just a little bigger than a coffee mug and tapered to fit into a standard cup-holder, Dziama's "charging vessel" is a portable solution to a bane of modern existence: cord management. Designed for use on a desk or during a car commute, the power bucket is both a charging port and a cord caddy.



04

Student: Jon Fratti

Project: Pop Shelf

Umbra VP of design Matt Carr says the firm's brand guidelines are "modern, original, functional, affordable, and casual." He likes how Fratti hit as many of those goals as he could in this shelf design, notable for its sound-absorbing face, which helps reduce noise pollution in small spaces. Fratti gave his little shelf both interior and exterior storage potential, maximizing the utility of every available surface.



05

Student: Christopher Groves

Project: Rocket

Groves went after one of the most cluttered spaces in any dwelling, the bathroom vanity. He says his portable "rocket" stand "fits in wherever it is needed to hold toothbrushes, towels, toilet paper, and more." The oval shelving in the stand provides adjustable heights as well.



06

Student: Vincent Lin

Project: Buoyancy

Umbra's Matt Carr chose this prototype by Lin for the company's 2018 kitchen collection. "He was really investigating the area between the kitchen counter and the space under your cabinet," says Carr. "He came up with a paper towel holder that went horizontal. He elevated it and put a nice dish underneath it. We think it's really great."

COURTESY THE DESIGNERS



07

Student: Mick Bartholomew

Project: Waver Basket

Who says a fruit bowl can't rock, fly, or hang out on a wall? Bartholomew says his kitchen design for Umbra is meant to clear off some counter space and add a little whimsy to everyday living. Umbra's VP of design loved it. "Students are naive in a good way," says Carr. "They're totally willing to take risks because they've never lost before. They're in a sweet spot."



08

Student: Jeff Bruha

Project: Pail

Food composting is often a challenge in urban spaces. Who wants to add another waste container to an already tiny kitchen? And more importantly, who wants to deal with the smell? Bruha attacked both these challenges with his slender compost-collecting container design. "Its charcoal filter ensures that odors are contained," he says. "Your kitchen remains clean and comfortable."

Metaproject 06



01

Student: Afifi Ishak

Project: Sticky Memo Ball

Ishak, a student from Malaysia and the creator of this 12-sided sticky-note ball that will retail for \$12 this autumn, said he was astounded when Poppin offered him a design fee. "I'll buy as many as I can for my family and friends," he says. "My first product! I'm going to have it on permanent display."



02

Student: Emily Moore

Project: Task Chair Overhanger

No more hanging your coat, scarf, or hat precariously over the side of a cubicle wall. Moore wanted to provide a little more security for office workers, so she designed this bright chair accessory to make use of oft-overlooked space. She also liked the idea of decluttering foot space by keeping bags and backpacks off the floor.



03

Student: Veronica Lin

Project: Foot Pebble

This prototype by Lin was her interpretation of Poppin's "Work Happy" tagline. She calls her ergonomic foot elevator a way to engage in "a playful and versatile dialogue with the rest of your body without disrupting the work flow." Jeff Miller, Poppin's VP of design, says that he loved seeing how inventive RIT students could be. "As you get older, you get better," says Miller. "But you don't explore as much."



04

Student: Stephanie Saucier

Project: Poppin Power

RIT students made a careful study of Poppin's office accessory collection before they began designing, and Saucier saw an opportunity to create an add-on for a colorful desk tray already on the market. She turned the tray into a small power tower, adding a wired base with a gap for cord storage. "These pieces work cohesively to create one unit that provides power, organization, and convenience," says Saucier.



05

Student: Maxwell Whitehead

Project: Adjustable Desktop Divider

The open secret about open workspaces, which are so popular right now, is that many people don't actually like them. The noise, the distractions, and the lack of privacy can all take a toll on productivity. Whitehead designed this mini-fort prototype for Poppin, hoping, he says, to create "a visual indicator to fellow employees, signaling when someone is available for collaboration or wishes to be left alone."



06

Student: Tristan Cannan

Project: Booster Desk

Cannan calls his Booster Desk prototype "a reaction to the oversights of the standing-desk revolution," noting that electronic moving desks are cost-prohibitive for many people and mechanical desks can be cumbersome. The design student opted for ease and affordability in his transitional product for the Metaproject collaboration with Poppin.



07

Student: Linghua Zhu

Project: Phone Docking Station

One or more mobile phones are the ubiquitous guests on every desk these days, and Zhu thought she could improve their presence. "I created a design that combines a penholder with a cell phone holder," she says. "The leaning angle of the project...creates enough space for the charging cable to go through." Her prototype also places phones in an upright position so workers can quickly scan incoming messages without having to pick up their device and get lost in a rabbit hole of distractions.



08

Student: Elizabeth Talamo

Project: Cable Hideaway 2.0

Poppin's Jeff Miller told RIT students that he looks for "as much reduction as possible," and Talamo took that directive to heart. She designed a cord-storage unit that fits between and under two desks, allowing employees to plug in their laptops in the sleekest way possible, all without tangling up their feet in cable spaghetti.

COURTESY THE DESIGNERS