It's a Little You, a Little Me

How do you take a style you admire and make it your own? Learn from design luminaries who have been mentored by the best

**THE MENTOR:**

**ALBERT HADLEY**

Half of the famed decorating office Parish-Hadley Associates—whose clients include the Social elite—Mr. Hadley is often referred to as the dean of American decorating. He died earlier this year.

The celebrated vet-treasure library that Mr. Hadley envisioned for philanthropist Brooke Astor’s Park Avenue duplex gets all the attention, but his master bedroom is just as much of a showpiece.

Designed in the early 1960s—and an update of Parish-Hadley's original scheme—the room was austerely restful hues, pedantic antiques and modern artifacts to create an oasis of patron calm. Mr. Hadley used the same pale-green Alan Campbell-linen paint for the walls and draperies, instilling coziness and intimacy in a grandly proportioned space. He furnished the suite like a multilevel hangout, with a desk, sitting area and a scattering of armchairs in bedside lounging. In lieu of nightstands is a pair of anticked tables; swing-arm lamps offer a warm glow. The vibe is dainty yet strong, simultaneously old-world and forward-thinking.

**HIS PROTEGE:**

**BUNNY WILLIAMS**

Ms. Williams opened her firm in 1968, after more than two decades with Parish-Hadley. She has a furniture line, Bunny Williams Home, and runs the outdoor furnishings company Trelise with her husband, antique dealer John Russel.

Ms. Williams’ own bedroom exemplifies her design style. Mahogany bedside tables make for a less "decorator-y" look; tall lamps cast light at just the right height for reading in bed. Her palette is restful and a bit feminine, "I love bright modern prints, but I tend to use them sparingly since you live all of them. I do neutral—never white-on-white rooms." The mirrored bed is a 1960s creation by French designer Jean Royère. Ms. Williams upholstered the headboard in an Indian-inspired silk embroidery by Hassan Khan. "I use fabrics to look natural, whether a cotton or a silk or a good imitation," she has said in her Parish-Hadley days. The sumptuous bedspread, though, is all hers. "People who work for me always say that once they’ve learned how to make a Bunny bed, they can never go back!"

**THE CHAIN OF INFLUENCE:**

Four bedrooms reveal how design DNA evolves from generation to generation

**HIS PROTEGE:**

**NICK OLSEN**

Upper graduating from Columbia University, where he considered begging in architecture. Ms. Olsen apprenticed with Mr. Redd for five years before striking out on his own. nickolsonstyle.com

Mr. Olsen gave the master suite of his clients Upper East Side apartment the rich hand-painted Chinese wallpaper (a treatment often deployed by the other three designers as well). To keep the look fresh, bold accents like the bright yellow lamp serve to "jump it down." The four-poster mahogany bed—which the designer whitewashed—is from Oscar de la Renta Home, of which Mr. Redd is creative director. Although Ms. Olsen prefers asymmetrical furniture arrangements, here he installed order by echoing the bedside pieces. Taking a page from Ms. Williams, he exchanged low tables in favor of slightly taller chests that elevate the lamp, making it easier to read in bed and offering more storage space in tight quarters.

**HIS PROTEGE:**

**MILES REDD**

Mr. Redd began his design career working for Mr. Russel, then moved to Ms. Williams’ firm. He opened his own studio in 1998 and took on the creative directorship of Oscar de la Renta Home in 2003. miredoff.com

"I look forward to Bunny’s immeasured bed inspired by me," said Mr. Redd of his carpeted design. "I give her total props for killing the cope. My clients have given my bed a more luminous effect than the reflective shimmer of its predecessors, while a mattress-making adds a masculine element. I copied it to Ms. Williams’ more eternal sense. Mr. Redd’s space is grounded by dramatic touches like crisp black lampshades and framed mirrors. The sheen of low, mother-of-pearl side tables is offset by a low, backless, cushioned. "Distancing the texture was something Bunny taught me. You can’t have texture next to texture. You have to juxtapose slaps with rough, graphic with organic."

**THE END**
BY JEN RENZI

SO YOU'VE FLAGGED that single perfect photo in the stacks of decorating books cluttering your coffee table. You've found inspiration! Now comes the hard part: How do you put your own spin on that look, and adapt it to suit your needs?

We aren't the only ones who weather that challenge. Even decorators frequently grapple with the fine art of translation, especially at the dawn of their careers. Apprenticeship is something of a ventriloquist act, as professionals typically train under a mentor whose aesthetic they admire and whose design language they must internalize. When the protégé goes solo, his or her own vision blossoms—and yet inevitably bears the imprint of the mentor's DNA, from fabric preferences to favored furnishings and accessories.

Take designer Bunny Williams, who learned the tricks of the trade from society decorator Albert Hadley, renowned for giving classically appointed rooms a sense of architectural rigor and livability. "Albert was a true teacher, incredibly generous in sharing his experience and vision," said Ms. Williams. From him she learned how to run a business, collaborate with artisans and intermingle antiques with modern pieces. Most importantly, she mastered the fundamentals of a superior floor plan. "He taught me to lay out rooms based on how you really live in them. Ask anyone who worked at Parish-Hadley how they came up with the same furniture arrangements over and over again because they work. Our use of space is very similar regardless of our style."

She could say the same of her own protégé, New York decorator Miles Redd, whose glam interiors are likewise arrayed with convivial conversation, reading and relaxation in mind. "Bunny taught me everything I know: how one good thing can elevate everything else in a room; how to juxtapose materials and textures; who will upholster a chair for you overnight; how to arrange furniture; that a 7½-foot sofa

'Mr. Hadley, Bunny, Miles—they all have such a strong sense of scale and appropriateness,' said Nick Olsen of his predecessors.

should be 38 inches deep. From working for her, I have five pages of notes on curtains alone!" While his dandyish décor often nods to 1930s tailoring and '60s swank, Ms. Williams's unpretentious worldliness is evident, too.

Mr. Redd has also been known to channel his mentor's mentor. "When you work for someone who came from Parish-Hadley, you inevitably reference the firm's iconic interiors," he said. Mr. Redd lovingly riffed on the famous red-lacquered library Mr. Hadley designed for Brooke Astor. "Why mess with perfection? I consider it a friendly homage," said Mr. Redd. "And I always divulge the reference because the end result inevitably feels different." Another Parish-Hadley signature that's been passed down through the generations: taxicab-yellow walls. "We used it at Bunny's," Mr. Redd said, "and I still use it today."

So does Nick Olsen, who credits his former boss, Mr. Redd, for schooling him in all matters décor. "When I came to work for Miles, I had a strong sense of what I liked," Mr. Olsen said, "but I wasn't sure how to translate that to decorating."

Years spent executing someone else's style helped him to refine his own, he explained. Of course, it helps that the two have simpatico sensibilities. "For instance, Miles is brilliant at layering; that comes from a love of doodads, which I share," Other Redd trademarks were an acquired taste. "At first, I didn't get his thing for animal prints or velvet!" But now Mr. Olsen, who launched his firm in 2010, embraces both.

The young decorator's predecessors continue to inspire him. In fact, his initial ideation phase for a project often begins by leafing through design books and scrutinizing his heroes' put rooms together. "Mr. Hadley, Bunny, Miles—they all have such a strong sense of scale and appropriateness; their choices are so purposeful, and there's a confidence to their gestures." One look at Mr. Olsen's own tailored interiors and you'll see that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.