

A photograph of two men, Andy Faas and Dr. Melvin Freedman, smiling and posing for the magazine cover. They are both wearing dark suits, white shirts, and ties. The background is a solid blue color.

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a lifestyles exclusive:

Andy Faas and Dr. Melvin Freedman

Steps to a Cure

in this issue:

Leslie Diamond: Community Builder

Dr. Mostafa Elhilali: Revolutionizing Treatment

Lori Starr: Culture as Portal for Engagement



Photo courtesy of Ariel Muller

ARIEL MULLER

design and technology

BY JUDIE ORON

Understated and soft-spoken, Ariel Muller of Ariel Muller Designs keeps his talents close to his chest. It is difficult getting him to acknowledge, never mind boast about, his well-recognized design prowess. In the same way as his skills are held very much under the radar, his personality is so low-key and respectful that when a belly laugh and a killer smile burst forth, you're taken by surprise at the sudden forcefulness of his charm. Sitting in his elegant studio on a blustery Toronto afternoon, it becomes easier to see why the world's privileged come here to fulfill their design fantasies.

"What's happening now in the industry is that many designers have a signature look. And it's become very repetitive. We like to take a fresher look at design; it's more about really listening to a client. It's their home and they have a right to have it the way they want it." Muller says that although respect for the client and his wishes are paramount, the firm will absolutely not duplicate designs, though you may plead to have the exact same home

to buy the family business for a large sum of money. "But my grandmother wouldn't allow him to sell it because it was to be left for my father and his sister to carry it on. Who knew?" he smiles wryly. "After the war, Czechoslovakia was liberated by the Russians and the family had to sign everything over to the Communists."

The family lived in Haifa, Israel, and came to Canada in 1961, with very little in the way of property. Muller was

were very social and very connected to the Israeli community in Toronto. People who were on their way from Europe or Israel often stayed with the family while getting settled in Canada.

Muller seems to have inherited the family's highly social traits. He is still in touch with high school friends and for the last 10 years has attended weekly meetings with a men's network group that focuses on personal growth and charitable endeavors. His design firm also believes in giving back and donates generously to the Starlight Children's Foundation, which works to fulfill wishes for chronically and terminally ill children.



Photo courtesy of Ariel Muller

Residential media room integrating function and form.

theater as your friend or relative. It won't do you any good to beg, Muller is adamant. You pay for exclusivity and that's exactly what you get—along with a superb grasp of the technical and architectural sides of the business.

"I guess I grew up with it," Muller shrugs. "My mom studied design when she was pregnant with me so she likes to joke that that's where I got my first lessons." Muller's parents came from Eastern Europe after World War II. They met and married in Israel and Muller's older sister, Dorit, was born there. His grandfather had a large textile business and Muller remarks upon the irony that just before the war a wealthy American businessman wanted

born a year later and, until his parents learned English, he spoke Hebrew at home. He describes his family as "more into tradition and Zionism and not so into the religious aspects. They felt strongly about my having an understanding of the heritage and the language, so I went to Associated [Hebrew Schools of Toronto]." Muller's parents

His strengths were always in the arts, Muller says, but he also loved math and the sciences. Architecture seemed like a promising combination of the two areas. "So I was accepted into what was then the top school of architecture, which was the University of Waterloo, and I was very excited. But I realized after the first couple of years that, in truth, my passion was more in furniture and interior design—a scale slightly different from architecture, from city planning and larger structures." Muller switched from architecture to interior design, graduating from the International Academy of Design in Toronto in 1986.

He was just out of college when a friend, whose family was about to build

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a new custom home, approached him for help. "So I ended up working with the family and helping them to construct their dream home. It was wonderful," he recalls with a smile, "and very lucky for me in terms of the timing and the way it worked out."

Muller also had some early experience in his family's design business. "When I was graduating, my parents were building a design center and we'd travel to the States and to Europe, researching what furnishings and what pieces we were going to be importing. I also helped them design their showroom. It was a wonderful learning experience," he muses.

Muller set up his own studio in his parent's center. "What I focused on was custom furniture. Then, some of these larger TVs started to appear in the marketplace. It was a perfect time for me to be entering the market because in furniture design there was really nothing out there to house these monstrosities, these large boxes." In his parents' work complex there was a company that specialized in home theaters and, as Muller explains, "It was really a perfect opportunity to try to work together and create home theaters and home entertainment cabinets. And then, as a result of that, suddenly you're creating an environment to house that, whether it's a home theater or a family room. And from there, it evolved into doing complete residences."

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"We do corporate boardrooms and executive offices, but the majority of our work is upscale residential, both local and international."

This progression from home entertainment centers to complete residences, Muller feels, was a natural evolution for him, combining his love for interior design, his architecture background, and his fascination with everything scientific and technical. "The exposure to the electronics and to the home theater aspect gave me a new passion for integrating design and technology," he says. "People who are building custom homes typically will want to have the latest technology that's available. Many of our clients have busy lifestyles," Muller explains, showing me a small, flat screen with many options. "These home automation systems can control security, heating and air-conditioning, lighting systems, and motorized blinds."

Ariel Muller Designs also offers its services in interior design project management and, here, he emphasizes, the designer can never be called in too early. "We come on board to work with the client, the builder, and the architect to help expedite the process and to make sure that the design integrity is being carried through," Muller explains. "The sooner we're involved,

the sooner we can ensure that their lifestyle and functional concerns are being properly integrated in the design of their home. In many cases, it's difficult for a client to understand the feel of the space—it's just lines on a page," Muller says. "Quite often, unfortunately, the client brings in the designer late in the process, when the walls are already up and their options are now more limited—or more expensive. Each of us brings something valuable to the table," Muller says, "and it's all about bringing the team together to deliver exceptional results."

And what stories can Muller tell of his famous clients, their budgets, and their whims? He is too discreet to answer. "We've had the privilege of dealing with high-profile and celebrity clients, but we don't divulge names," he says firmly. "We do corporate boardrooms and executive offices, but the majority of our work is upscale residential, both local and international. We have to respect people's privacy. When we have clients with recognizable names, we even code the drawings for pricing and security reasons."

However Muller does agree to tell us about his work in Cuba on a government project. "The firm actually had two projects in Cuba, several years ago," he explains. "We were the design component for an upscale villa that was being restored in Havana. There was a restaurant below and on the second level there were boutiques. We worked on the design, on the supervision of

fabrication, and then on the supervision of installation. I even went to Cuba, which was a fascinating experience. When the diplomats were here they wanted everything delivered as quickly as possible. But it was like in the film industry when they say, 'Hurry up and wait.' We get down there and 'where's the shipment?' So I'm waiting and waiting in the port of Havana," he says, then shrugs and laughs. "The second project was originally constructed to be a multistoried parking garage, but we were approached to determine if turning it into a shopping center was a viable option. I think Fidel Castro decided that the people really needed a shopping center rather than just another garage. Of course, he might send somebody after me if this gets out," he says, laughing.

"Castro's not well," I say reassuringly. "So what did you do with the ramps between the floors?" I ask. "It was a hybrid. We had enclosed displays, like vignettes, which could be changed over time. It was an inter-

we mark up our trades or suppliers. So, yes, because we're very detailed and that takes time, the process can be expensive. It doesn't have to be a massive home but it has to be a client that wants something that's unique, something special." Muller adds, "We're very hands-on with the client and on the site. We often hear that with other firms the principal is difficult to reach or not involved and so things get handed down to a less senior and less experi-

able, the architect, builder, or real estate agent who is looking to refer will keep us in mind and will share with the client that we are one of the most capable, ethical, and integral interior design firms in the city."

Muller shows me drawings of a recent project, pointing out an impressive piano lounge within a large residence. Except for a sculpture by the famous glass artist Dale Chihuly, it appears that almost every-



Photo courtesy of Ariel Muller

Chopin meets Chihuly in a residential music room.

"We're not looking to grow or to expand for the sake of expanding. We're not looking to be a household name. What we are hoping for is that when there is a quality project available, the architect, builder, or real estate agent who is looking to refer will keep us in mind and will share with the client that we are one of the most capable, ethical, and integral interior design firms in the city."

esting project—parking garage turned shopping center!"

When it comes to budgets, Muller is equally oblique. "We generally work on residences that are 5,000 to 40,000 square feet in size," he explains. "We do not receive a commission, nor do

enced member of the firm. We work as a boutique operation," Muller says. "We're not looking to grow or to expand for the sake of expanding. We're not looking to be a household name. What we are hoping for is that when there is a quality project avail-

thing was custom designed. I can't resist dubbing the exquisite room "Chopin with Chihuly."

With Steinways and Chihulys involved, you can be sure the process will be dear. But it's also bound to be pure pleasure. **lifestyles**