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## Cover Story

# Woman on Top

With a new furniture line and a growing number of high-profile projects, Houston interior architect Lauren Rottet is in demand

#### By Sarah Rufca

Before she was a design-world darling, Lauren Rottet's early dreams of success were to be driven to work in a limousine.

As it happened, she was just a few years out of college and working as an architect in Chicago when she learned that her landlord worked in the same building that she did and rode in every morning in a limo. Rottet convinced him to let her ride along each day.

"I couldn't afford to eat, but there I was, riding to work in a limo," said Rottet with a laugh.

Thirty years later, Rottet is the president and founding principal of Rottet Studio, one of the most in-demand interior architecture firms in the world, with satellite offices in Los Angeles, New York and Shanghai.

Her résumé includes high-profile projects from corporate headquarters to hotels; she's known for her ability to infuse even the most stark space with soft textures and lines, unexpectedly bold art and a sense of motion and freshness. She has been named designer of the year by Interiors magazine, admitted into the Interior Design hall of fame and is one of only eight people — the only woman — to be named a fellow by both the American Institute of Architects and the International Interior Design Association.

Besides her firm's 105 active and completed projects this year, Rottet also just debuted a buzzed-about 33-piece furniture collection with Decca Home at October's High Point Market, which will hit stores in April.

Four years after she curated a landmark show of art furniture at Houston's Barbara Davis Gallery featuring works by Zaha Hadid, Ross Lovegrove and Arik Levy, the new Rottet Home Collection reflects her embrace of sleek lines and contemporary furniture shapes interspersed with traditional materials, such as rattan



Karen Warren / Houston Chronicle

At her office in downtown Houston, Lauren Rottet sits on an origami-inspired table, part of her new Rottet Home Collection with Decca.

and wood. The Cubist line includes tables with origami-inspired folded edges and crumpled, faceted planes, while the Montauk Gray line is inspired by Rottet's midcentury Long Island abode designed by George Nelson, with acrylic bases contrasting against the solid tabletops and chair shells to give them the illusion of floating. It's not Rottet's first foray into residential product design — the Evaneau sofa she designed for her own home has been a best-seller for 20 years — but it's her largest collection to date.

It's a far cry from her humble beginnings. Born in Waco, Rottet traces her Texas roots back generations and says she remembers the day a Dr Pepper salesman knocked on her door and asked her mother to try their soda. She moved to Houston at age 7. For college, she enrolled



First lady of design **→Global force:** To see more pictures of Lauren Rottet's work,

at the University of Texas, focusing on art and pre-med classes before finding her way to architecture.

"In art I drew buildings and I drew the







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#### ON THE COVER

Photography: Karen Warren / Houston Chronicle Houston interior architect Lauren Rottet poses near an elevator at downtown's Mellie Esperson building.

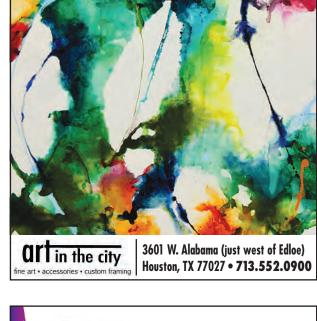






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space between buildings," she said. "It was Tim, who later became my husband, who said, 'You need to be an architect.' It was like a light going on in my head. I loved art, I loved math, I loved science, and all I ever painted were buildings."

Her career led Rottet to stints in San Francisco, Chicago and Los Angeles, but it was when she was working in Texas during the 1980s that it took an unexpected turn. After leading the design and construction of two high-rises in Dallas, the local economy cratered. Firms were still moving their offices, but big construction projects were shelved — so when someone in her firm suggested Rottet try her hand at interiors, she was game.

"High-rises are so impersonal. My first interiors project was the Trammell Crow offices in Dallas. When we designed that building, no one questioned any decisions, because you're the architect. When I did the office for those same people, it was, 'How big is my desk drawer? How's it going to function? Where am I going to put my papers? Where's my secretary going to sit?' Just every question imaginable," said Rottet. "That's because it's personal. It's their space, and I found that interesting. We were affecting people's lives."

Since then, Rottet has built her reputation adding life to other corporate offices, among them the BMC Software headquarters in Houston, San Francisco's Artis Capital Management and the United Artists Agency in Los Angeles. However, after starting her own firm in 2008, she found herself itching to design a hotel. It wasn't an easy sell.

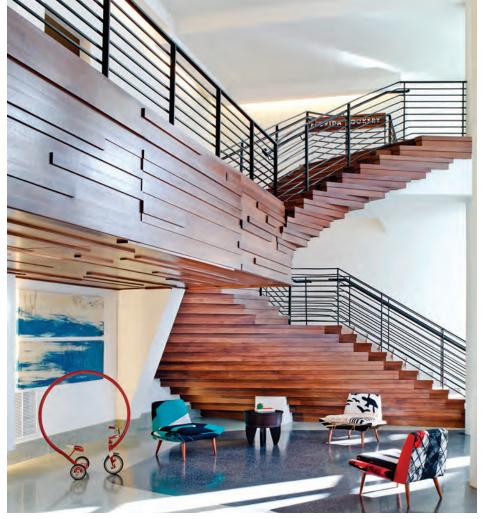
"We were so known for doing offices that no one would take a chance on us," said Rottet.

She got a lucky break when one of the owners of the Surrey Hotel, on New York's posh Upper East Side, saw an office space that Rottet had designed for a company in Paris, which was subsequently featured in a magazine (as is most of Rottet's work nowadays).

"He said, 'That's the feeling I want for The Surrey," said Rottet. "That's what got us in the door."

Of course, that break was just the beginning. Rottet stayed at the hotel for a week and a half to get a sense of the building and the neighborhood, waking up at 3 a.m. to poke around the hotel when people wouldn't wonder what she was doing. Accustomed to working on sleek, minimalist office spaces, she made her team re-create the hotel's 12-foot walls at full scale inside her office so she could get the right proportion for the traditional

The result was a study in sophisti-



Lauren Rottet said the James Hotel in Miami Beach was inspired by an imagined meeting between Jean-Michel Basquiat and Virginia Woolf.

cated luxury that married the glamour of the 1920s with occasional touches of modern artistic irreverence that became an immediate sensation. The design earned Rottet Studio a rare two Gold Key Awards for Excellence in Hospitality Design, won "Best in Show" at the International Interior Design Association Awards and

received two nominations in the Interior Design Best of Year Awards. The Surrey's Bar Pleiades was dubbed the "best instant classic since the Chanel suit" by Time Out New York

Since then, Rottet Studio has designed a slew of hip hotels across the country, including the St. Regis

Left: The

lobby at the Surrey Hotel in New York's **Upper East** Side, designed by Rottet Studio. Right: The Cubist swivel chair from the new Rottet Home Collection by Decca Home.

in Aspen, the presidential bungalows at the famed Beverly Hills Hotel and the James Royal Palm in Miami Beach, which won another Gold Key Award last week for the best luxury guest room. Closer to home, Rottet's hospitality projects have included Philippe Restaurant near the Houston Galleria and Lone Star Court, a new retro-roadside-style lodging option at the Domain in Austin that opens in December. She's also currently designing rooms on the Viking River Cruises ships.

"In hotels, it's all about the guest experience. The second they get out of the car and meet that doorman, they're in a whole different world. You put them in a movie and you don't let them out," said Rottet. "I write a little story in my head. For the James (in Miami), my story was that Jean-Michel Basquiat and Virginia Woolf were walking down the beach and they saw each other and started talking, he being an artist and she being a poet and a writer, and they went back to the James and had cocktails and went back to their separate rooms. It was all about the two of them and the art and the bohemian and the creation and two souls meeting at a hotel and what a hotel could do to make creativity spark."

And yet despite her global tastemaker status, Rottet is committed to living and working in her hometown.

"Being as involved in the design world as I am, when you tell someone you live in Houston, up until about a year ago, the response was always, 'Oh, my gosh, seriously? Why?'" said Rottet. "Now people say, 'Really? Wow, I've never been to Houston, and I really want to go.' It's been a huge swing. I think it's a much more interesting and dynamic city than it was a few years ago."

The days of catching a ride in someone else's limo might be long gone — these days she prefers piling her two dogs into her white Mercedes and driving

herself — but one thing is clear: In work and in life, Lauren Rottet is clearly in the driver's seat. sarah.rufca@chron.

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