





# MAGIC KINGDOM

INTERIOR DESIGN: PROJECT INTERIORS

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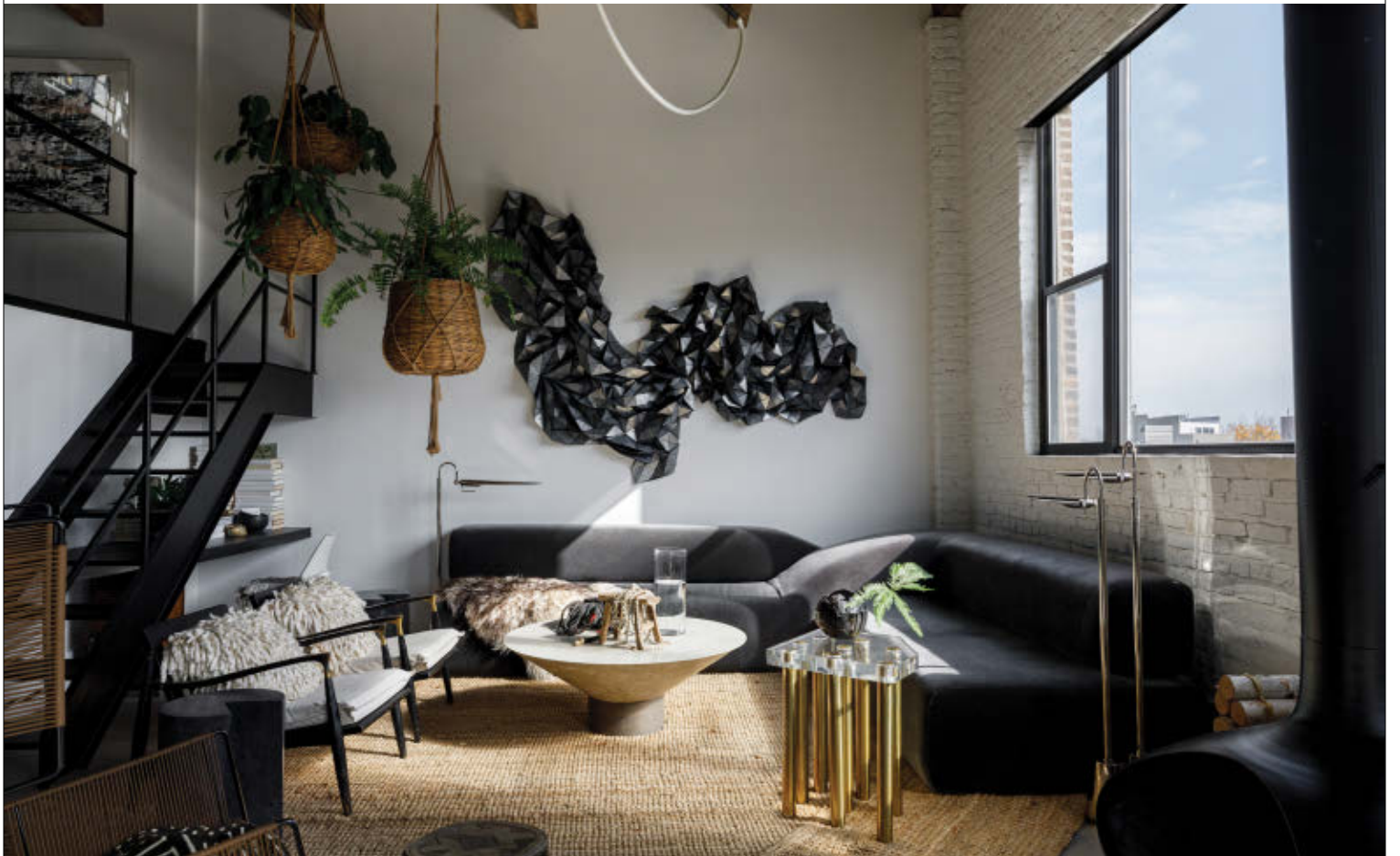
remember the day. I was 38 and I thought, 'I cannot turn 40 in this studio apartment,'" confides designer Aimee Wertepny, aware that this admission sounds like the rain-soaked declaration of a scripted character with a stellar wardrobe. That longtime apartment in Chicago's Ukrainian Village played its part well—an inviting, funky crash pad that welcomed Wertepny and her treasures back from every cross-continental adventure. It was the disco nap of urban dwellings, and 17 years ago it saw the birth of PROJECT Interiors, her evocative, material-centric case for authentic design and why it matters.

Devoting herself to creating clients' dream interiors and her philanthropic work in Africa, the peripatetic designer was hardly able to host friends for takeout, let alone dive into the thrills of the Chicago real estate market. Fate was keeping watch. One afternoon she was seated next to an interior designer at an industry luncheon. He casually mentioned his place and that he and his partner might be looking to sell. She knew the building, a turn-of-the-century button factory with an intriguing glass-encased rooftop. She passed it daily en route to the PROJECT studio. "Everyone knows I just want to live in a box on a roof, like a glorified shipping container, where I can see the sky and the city," she muses.











**D**ays before a trip to Brazil, Wertepny visited the unit, a voluminous three-story wonderland with metal girders, exposed brick and unobstructed views—the kind of city loft that owes its intoxicating mythology to artists, rebels and legions of restless teens who dream about being both. “Visions were popping off in my head,” she says. “I felt like something really cool could happen there.” This time the brief was entirely hers: To conjure a resonant and soulful space with room to unfold a Leo’s world of layered objects and scintillating stories. A proper place to hang. A big girl place with an actual laundry room.

She painted the red brick white and instantly the design sauntered past industrial expectations of worn-in leather, slinky surfaces and Mies cameos. Instead, her luminous rendition of a penthouse loft is immersive, a place that surrounds you like a fragrance, revealing Afro-Brazilian notes, an all-in mood and late-night magic. It’s a home that lingers beautifully in sentiments. “I have all of the things that are sacred to me in here,” she says of pieces that aren’t purely decorative: A gifted ficus tree festooned with the names of close friends, the tie her Tutoring Chicago mentee wore on his graduation day, rocks and sand collected from everywhere, Maasai jewelry from East Africa, letters from children in Tanzania, a country she fell in love with more than a decade ago on a transformative trip to construct a school. (Wertepny has since been back to mentor and volunteer in orphanages.) She has partnered with and hosted fundraisers for the organization BuildON. Alongside members of PROJECT, she built a school in rural Nicaragua a few years ago. Her most recent expedition was to Nepal.

Thanks to the care of the previous owners, she was spared the gauntlet of a gut rehab. “I inherited some good bones—the exposed beams, the wood ceiling—I was set up for success.” She edited with spunk. An angled closet on the main floor was converted into the “monkey bar,” a glint-y cocktail cove dressed in a jungle mural started with a friend, artist Amanda Morrison of Colorblind Creative (on an ambitious night with tequila) and finished by Chicago artist Chris Trejo.

Subverting the theatrics of a modern kitchen, sumptuous, blackened rift-oak custom cabinetry from Botempo though Armazem gives a sultry take on a high-function area. “I wanted to create a little sense of mystery because the front door opens straight into the kitchen,” she explains, “and it was important to me that the view wasn’t the backside of an island.” The mezzanine leading up to the third-floor bedroom suite was reimagined as a cozy bunk nook for her nieces. Inspired by the architecture in Mexico City and Palm Springs, the designer replaced a soft wall in the principal bedroom with stacked breeze block, a full height element that filters light. Draped in linen, the space is an atmospheric wash of texture and easy splendors reminiscent of a tent Wertepny stayed in while on safari. A roof deck is just steps away.

Even with three stories of fascinating personal artefacts, Wertepny’s sorcery is her sublime contrasts. Mirthful, emotional, groovy, each frame reads like a rousing RSVP: “Yes, looking forward to it. Bringing friends.” These captivating pairings are why the loopy unpretentiousness of Pedro Franco Design’s nylon sofa relates to a bodacious slab of gold-veined Brazilian quartz that doubles as a dining table / WFH station. “You can have like your chakras cleansed while you’re working here,” says Wertepny, tucked into the 11-foot Opuzen felted suede banquette.

This push and pull of the disparate is everywhere. Revelers can spread across two main lounge areas. A bubble chair allows for daydreaming in solitude. Her headboard is upholstered in a rug. (“I don’t think I have any fabrics in here that are off of a bolt from a showroom.”) The laundry room floor is bedecked with a lion’s head whose third eye (forehead) is made from Maasai tribe jewelry remnants. “I think anyone who knows me knows that I’m a no-frills person,” she says. “These are pieces that I hunted and gathered or inherited from client projects. It feels really good to breathe new life into things that have a soul.” ■ *PROJECT Interiors, [projectinteriors.com](http://projectinteriors.com)*









