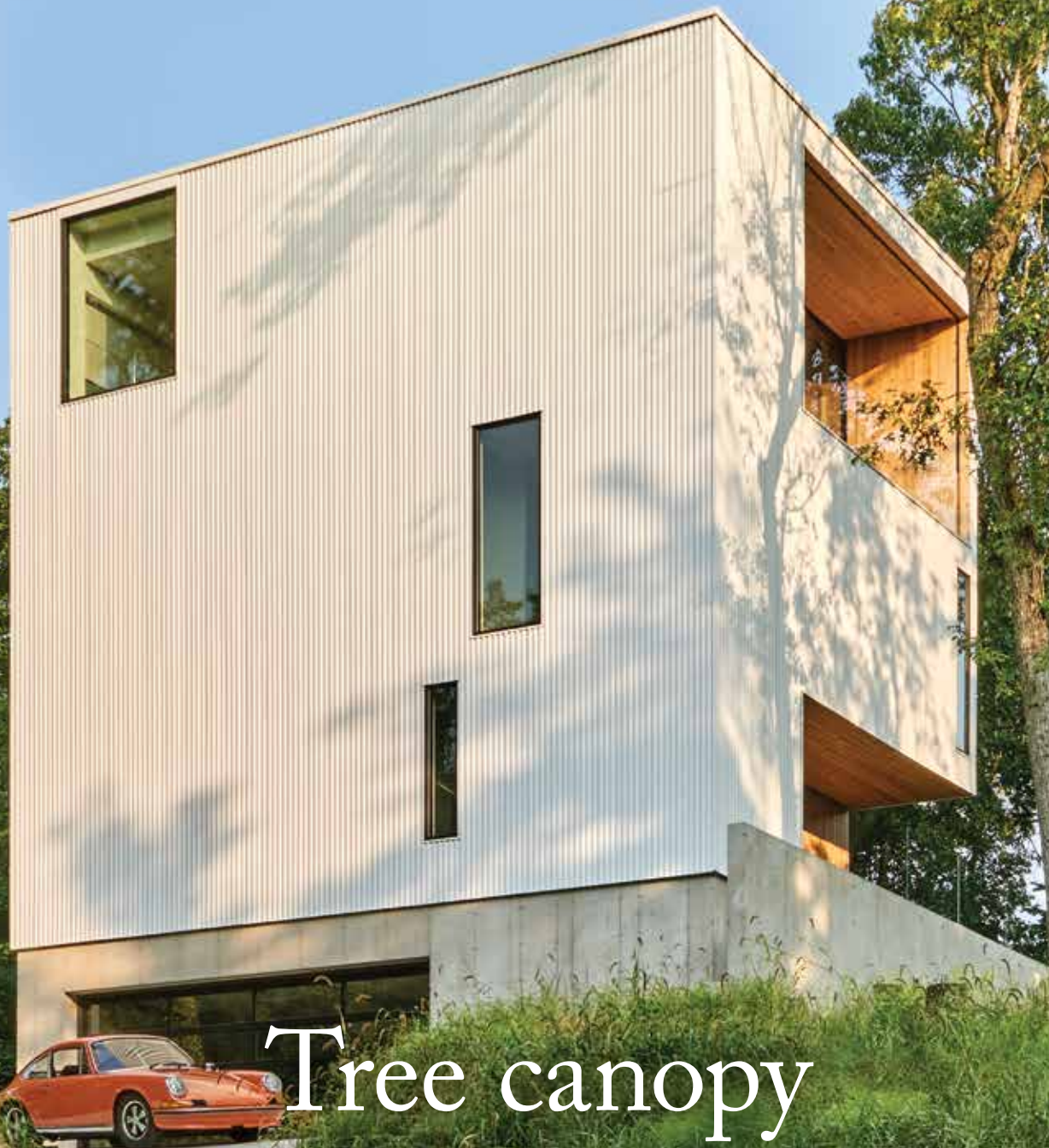


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# In celebration

Text: R.J. Weick

**L**auren Svenstrup, founding principal of Studio Sven in Chicago, Illinois, is self-admittedly not a “yes person” when it comes to her clientele and her passion for design. Instead, it is about finding that rich, creative balance in a pursuit of curiosity over conformity, dedicated to a process of discovery, of exploration, and of the powerful potential of why. Her

work, as creative director of the luxury residential design firm, has been recognized over the years as intriguing and nuanced, bold and balanced, and refined and reflective of her clients with an underlying thread that embraces and celebrates the unapologetic across her portfolio.

Yet, when delving just below the surface—as she does when getting to know her clients—

there is something more behind it that makes it all the more compelling. For Svenstrup, whose process explores the disruptive, the aspirational, and the countercultural, design is a tool of communication and of expression. Like a linguist, she strives to study, understand, and translate a client’s personality into a fully built, spatial experience; and as a designer, she has developed an uncanny knack for understanding a client’s assorted passions, memories, hopes, and dreams. Details, like soulful facets, are embedded as tactile and invisible elements to the spaces her clients inhabit, inviting introspection and honest connection as one moves, interacts, and engages with spaces undeniably defined by their owners.

“Everything stems from the why. It is about getting to know our clients on a deeper level before we ever start to jump into the function or the aesthetics of it, and I always do these first interviews in their homes, because it is as much about what I observe as what they tell me. How do they greet you at the door? Where do they sit? How do they interact with each other? It is really about observing all of those elements, talking through lifestyle, and how they interact with their home that starts to inform the ‘why’ of it all,” Svenstrup said.

“We really start to peel away those surface layers and make meaningful discoveries that can be applied in ways that not only contribute to a more beautiful home, but a more impactful environment. It is our responsibility to discover and appreciate every aspect of the project and get to the root of what the client truly needs, not just what they think they want—obviously, we are looking for aesthetically pleasing and highly functional design that matches those needs, but it can be so much more than that,” Svenstrup added.

Founded in 2014, Studio Sven is a full-service residential interior design studio for the bold. Informed by its cohesive, holistic approach to design, in which no detail is overlooked, Studio Sven seeks to address design solutions and lifestyle aspirations, translating them into residential and boutique hospitality spaces where clients can thrive—all the while embracing opportunities for the unexpected throughout the design and build process. Over its decade-long history, Studio Sven has undergone its own dis-







covery process developing into a firm that strives to bring meaning to luxury interiors defined by its successful, empowered clients who embrace daringness, intentionality, and a wish to live unapologetically—an evolution that as Svenstrup noted is ironically a full-circle moment.

“When I started my business 10 years ago, I had the initial idea to create a niche for myself working with bachelors, but you have to take the work that comes to you when you are first starting out, so we did initially work with

a variety of clients. Years later, I was fortunate enough to secure a series of bachelor clients and was quickly reminded of how much I love the demographic and process,” Svenstrup said.

“I forced myself to follow my own signature discovery process—asking questions like, what is it that I truly enjoy about this clientele? What sets them apart and their projects apart from past projects? The deeper I got into the questioning, I began to realize it wasn’t actually about their relationship status. Rather, this de-

mographic all had a similar underlying desire and decision-making hierarchy based on where they were in their lives. We refer to this mindset as embracing ‘unapologetic living.’ To me, unapologetic living is about living in the moment and without regret, while remaining confident in those decisions,” Svenstrup added.

Svenstrup has since honed a passion for the field that has become so integral to her own life that she often feels it is simply a way in which she views the world rather than a profession



she has chosen. She noted as a kid, she spent all of her free time sewing, sponge painting, and learning how to build furniture, and went on to attend Northern Michigan University in Marquette, Michigan in the Upper Peninsula to study furniture—and to snowboard.

“They had an amazing fine arts program, but it was more focused on being a true craftsman, not a designer. Those fundamentals were great for learning how things are made and the capabilities of wood, but at the end of the day I knew it wasn’t my calling, and I didn’t want to be in a woodshop my whole life,” Svenstrup said. “So, I transferred to a brand new program called Human-Centered Design, which focused on the study of how humans interact with the spaces and objects around them, and how to communicate those designs.”

Svenstrup then spent several years working at a multi-family housing firm in Texas, honing her project-deadline and budget-focused approach to the work, before moving to

Chicago to work in high-end residential design. For her, it was a career pivot that made it clear that the impact she could have through design for individual clients outweighed her previous work. Shortly thereafter, she decided to take the leap and launch her own firm, Studio Sven.

“In order to live your best life, it’s not just about looking forward and creating a space that allows you to be the best version of yourself, but also about looking back,” Svenstrup said. “It’s reflecting on the person you were, the person you thought you would be, and how you got here—your passions, your hobbies, your stories, your accomplishments—it’s all part of you.”

It is this philosophy, paired with an inherent curiosity, that Svenstrup applies to each project, guiding clients through a dedicated discovery and design process that often defies the expected and gets to the heart of the matter, or the ‘why,’ behind each project. When it came to the

clients of the Wolf of Wacker and Puttin’ on the Ritz, breathtaking views, sophisticated interiors, and statement art define both projects, yet it is in the whimsy and the spirit of adventure that elevate them into spaces that reflect the dynamic owners’ personalities.

“Wolf of Wacker is a really beautiful penthouse location downtown with floor-to-ceiling windows. It’s positioned right on the river towering over Merchandise Mart, with panoramic views of the city. The client was at a point in his life where he had already built a very traditional custom home on the North Shore and he wanted to live in the city to embrace something different. It was all about the view and how he wanted to feel in the space,” Svenstrup said. “Through the design, we sought to create intimacy and warmth while seamlessly transitioning from the majority floor-to-ceiling windows. The black foyer opens up to the perfect shade of sky blue creating a smooth continuation of the city sky-





line. Additionally, he requested an art-filled home, but also a transformative space to have a clear division of work and self.”

Wolf of Wacker is defined by fearless color, sculptural furnishings, and a touch of whimsy, reflecting the client’s penchant for Tom Ford fashion, tongue-in-cheek art, and rich textures. The client, who had an established home office pre-pandemic, knew a standing desk, his music, and city views were all that he needed to support his working lifestyle in that room, and wanted a clear delineation between function. Typical constraints like scale and lack of wall space drove the need for multi-function and a creative introduction to color.

“A hand-painted ceiling mural spans from the front door all the way through the main living areas. It was an opportunity to add tonal impact and transform the ceiling into a piece of art,” Svenstrup said.

Textures like the reflective metallic of the built-in bench, the sheen and luster of the silver-leafed column, and patchwork cowhide rug, were also layered throughout the space to lend tactile impression to furnishings and the overall unit. The artwork was carefully chosen to break up “that perfect shade of blue” and view, with pops of art in different mediums, like textiles, sculptures, and an oversized, hanging sculpture made of wire.

For the client of Puttin’ on the Ritz, Svenstrup was tasked with the interior redesign of a unit within the Ritz-Carlton Residences of Chicago, designed by architect, Lucien Lagrange. While space presented a familiar constraint due to its downtown location, there was the added challenge of turning the design around in a single week before the client left for a six-week venture to complete one of his last milestones in the Explorer’s Grand Slam—

an adventurer’s goal to reach the North Pole, South Pole, and all Seven Summits.

“I was instantly fascinated by him. His sense of adventure, his spontaneity—it was just contagious. He was a mountaineer with death-defying hobbies and I was so inspired that I agreed to turn around a design in one week, which I would never do in any other situation. His first goal was obviously to move quickly. He thought he was bringing me in for a very functional thing, to furnish his home. But during that initial consultation, we realized he was actually in search of a space that celebrated his lifestyle and his spirit, but also suited his tendency for constant movement,” Svenstrup said. “He, like a lot of my clients, had very specific hobbies and interests and needs. I always strive to elevate, never diminish.”

Rather than a literal translation of the client’s passion for mountaineering, the intent was



to evoke the sense of adventure, the experiential, and the playful storytelling through abstract art and installations. As guests explore the home for the first time, there are intentional points to naturally stop and experience the space—and by extension, the client’s personality and accomplishments. Svenstrup noted during the initial interview, the client had a propensity for truly interacting with the space—pacing, pausing in windows to take in the view, and perching on furnishings and surfaces not meant to be perched on—and she wanted to try to capture and encourage that through the design.

“This is not only how he experiences space, but it is how he lives his life. Therefore, how people experience him and his home. So, I questioned, how do I design a space that is not only perfect for him, but as perfect of an experience as possible for people coming into his home for the first time? It was about very intentionally designing furnishings and objects that are meant to be interacted with,” Svenstrup said. “He kept pausing at this corner window and leaning on the deep window sill that was slightly too high to be a true window seat. That’s when I realized it was not enough for him to just have the view,

he needs to be in the view. I immediately went to—how do I give that to him?”

Subtly leaning into the theme, the walls are wrapped in custom built-ins and millwork, and the ceiling showcases a hand-painted mural of abstracted mountains. The furnishings are playful, organic and as durable as they are meant to be fun. A series of nine custom, 3D-printed topographical maps of the summits in the Explorer’s Grand Slam were purposefully designed to be removed and used as interactive sculptures for storytelling. Other features comprise a large-scale, self-portrait of a famous mountaineer who





just survived an avalanche, as well as a suspended chandelier that evokes the tapering of calcium salt deposits, icicles, and cavern stalactites.

While the main living spaces take inspiration from the client's personality, his aspirational goals, and hobbies—elevating them rather than displaying accomplishments literally—the bedroom was a complete juxtaposition, serving as an intimate cocoon dedicated to reset and nest.

“I think a well-designed space allows you to live in the present and is a healthy reflection of the past, but living in the present and looking toward the future allows for growth in different ways. No environment can be perfectly curated in every moment or situation, but making sure that we are designing with challenges of daily life in mind, eases those little things, and I find it incredibly rewarding,” Svenstrup said.

Over the years, success at the studio has

evolved much like its clientele, growing and expanding, taking on more projects and employees, and as the team looks to its next decade, they are dedicated to working with clients who embrace their signature Discovery Process, are open to the unexpected, and remain curious. The studio strives to offer a concierge level of services to their clientele, going above and beyond furnishings and construction management, meeting their clients where they are in life—embracing that unapologetic living.

“The term unapologetic is so accurate, but it is also a little tricky. It is putting self-enjoyment and self-fulfillment and function as a priority within the confines of their home and doing so without regret, but that doesn't mean a complete disregard for everyone else in your home. We strive to make these spaces inviting and comforting for guests, but our first priority is how our homeowners want to live in their space and how they specifically want to entertain,” Svenstrup said.

“We encourage our clients to step back and focus on themselves—their needs, their passions, their memories, their dreams. Focus the ROI on yourself first and on the resale value second. That flexibility allows for us to venture outside of the box and create environments that meet you where you are, then take you to the next level,” Svenstrup added.