

# BUILDING COMM

## How Hudson Kruse Design is living the design dream

by Luigi Benetton

**The fall of 1999 brought interior designer Trevor Kruse** the opportunity to work on the (then) Ritz Carlton condominium project in Toronto.

The project came with a catch, though. "They asked me to set up a company and they would bring the project with them," Kruse recalls of the chance to do space planning for suites in the top 40 floors of what is now the Trump Tower. The project proved less than straightforward in other ways, too. Kruse found himself bounced on and off the project as project ownership and other circumstances changed. Finally, "unbeknownst to me, Ed Zeidler, of Zeidler Architects, was singing my praises, and they brought me back," Kruse says. "The level of support they gave me surprised me."

Kruse's "incidental" creation, Hudson Kruse Design, proved a more stable entity despite the owner's ambivalence. "I never really wanted my own company, but when

the opportunity came, I decided to start the company. It was a happy accident," Kruse admits.

Hudson Kruse Design (Hudson being Kruse's mother's maiden name), by its principal's estimate, devotes 70 per cent of its efforts to taking condominium projects to market. The remainder is spent on private residential projects, "going from paper to the moment when clients move into the houses," Kruse says. This residential focus grew from Kruse's upbringing in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, a town of 15,000. "I was artistic growing up, but I was able to start taking drafting classes in

Grade 5," he recalls as he reels off other courses taken and skills acquired at a young age, including his Grade 12 interior design class. "I knew from the age of 10 that I wanted to develop places for people to live."

"My family was building a new house when I was in Grade 10," Kruse continues. "I did the drawings, and my father and I visited the site every day to check the process. What I did in school was complemented by what I did day by day in the real world. I know that is a rare opportunity."

When a guidance counsellor told Kruse about the two interior design degree programs in Canada at the time, he chose Ryerson University, where he completed a Bachelor of Applied Arts in Interior Design (BAAID) in 1986.

Kruse didn't need to look far for inspiration when choosing the subject of his fourth-year project. "I did the Sears Warehouse, right across the street from the Ryerson School

The Capital, Mississauga, Ontario.



PHOTO: ARASH MOALLEMI



# UNITY

of Interior Design," he recalls. "I designed it about four years before it was converted, almost exactly as I designed it – not that they ever saw what I had done in school. When I started my company, the developer asked me to finish common areas of the project, which were in my thesis."

Kruse isn't done with school. "I hope to be accepted at the University of Minnesota for my Masters degree."

Hudson Kruse Design has built strong relationships with other developers, an accomplishment Kruse attributes to his extracurricular activities. "I was always a diligent participator. I joined committees and clubs. I volunteered for all kinds of things," he explains. "When I moved here, I didn't know anyone. This was my process of creating a strong network. After I graduated, I volunteered for the Association of Registered Interior Designers of Ontario (ARIDO). I've worked with them in every capacity (including president)."

Kruse also counts the two jobs he held prior to starting Hudson Kruse Design as important stepping stones. He spent 11 years at Linda Boorman Interiors Ltd., where he rose to senior designer, followed by three years at Gluckstein Design. He credits each employer for helping him develop as a designer, particularly at Gluckstein's larger firm. "There were more people I could compete with as colleagues who forced me to up my game," he says.

After three years with Gluckstein, other opportunities appeared and headhunters called. "I left Gluckstein to sort through my options and settled on starting Hudson Kruse Design when the Ritz opportunity arrived later that year," Kruse recalls.

Boorman's and Gluckstein's management techniques also stayed with their former employee. "They showed me that you have to give a certain amount of autonomy to your staff, to let them make decisions, to have relationships with clients, and if a mistake is made, you stand behind the employee. The firm comes up with solutions."

"I have a strong team," he continues. "Most manage their own projects. Part of my strategy is for them to develop stronger relationships with clients so clients don't always have to contact me. I'm hands-on when clients want me to be, but I try to give my team a lot of freedom. Everybody is responsible for every part of individual projects. I don't want them to feel they have to turn to me for approval."

It's a practical idea. Citing the roughly 60 projects the firm, whose staff numbers fluctuate between eight and

12, has on the go, Kruse notes: "There isn't enough of me to go around."

This approach serves as part of a foundation for continuous development, along with the fact that the firm often handles multiple projects for individual developers. "These developers help us work with great architects," he says. "Each project helps us improve. With each project, clients give us more leeway to create better solutions."

"I have somebody from almost every design school in the GTA, like Humber College, Sheridan College, Ryerson University, the University of Toronto. I'm trying to keep it balanced."

This mix supports one of Kruse's design aims. "When you look at our portfolio, our projects don't look the same," he says. "My goal is not to have a specific vocabulary. Clients don't come to us to get the look of a Hudson Kruse solution. We change our vocabulary to suit the project."

Kruse admits to a soft spot for space planning. "If I could lock myself in a room and space plan by hand, I would be happy," he says, adding that his reputation encourages other designers to seek his help on space planning challenges.

Given the spaces he's called home, which include a converted church

rectory and his current digs, a converted warehouse across the street from his West Toronto office, it's easy to spot Kruse's appreciation for conversions. "Toronto has great building stock that can be successfully converted into homes," he says.

Among the awards his firm has piled up, one that's close to his heart is the National Post Design Exchange Award earned for a 2005 conceptual project proposing infill housing in Toronto's back alleys. "It was a fun project," he says of the idea that has since garnered other awards. "I continue to work on it as a concept that may or may not ever happen. One of the great things about this project is it fulfills Toronto's official plan to intensify. It protects neighbourhoods without dropping condo towers on every corner."

In 2007, the Chicago-based International Interior Design Association (IIDA) recognized Kruse's work for the design community by making him the first Canadian winner of the IIDA Leadership award. "It allowed me to step up and participate on an international level," Kruse says.

Kruse's interest in his current role on several design school advisory councils dates back to his Ryerson days. "A core group of us in my class were really involved," he recalls. "We spent lots of time questioning our education and what we were getting from it."

What Kruse called extracurricular in school he wants to make "intracurricular" for today's students, starting with those at his firm. "When I bring in summer interns, they aren't made to feel like students. They participate," he says.

A common thread in these activities is the demonstration of an element of Kruse's personality that he confesses may sound trite. "Community-building – that's what every part of my life is about. I don't separate work, life or volunteering. To me it's one life, and I live it all the same." ■



The Laneway Mews Interior Design Show.

PHOTO: ELAINE KILBURN



One Cole Street, Toronto, Ontario.

PHOTO: SUSAN GOUNIN COCK