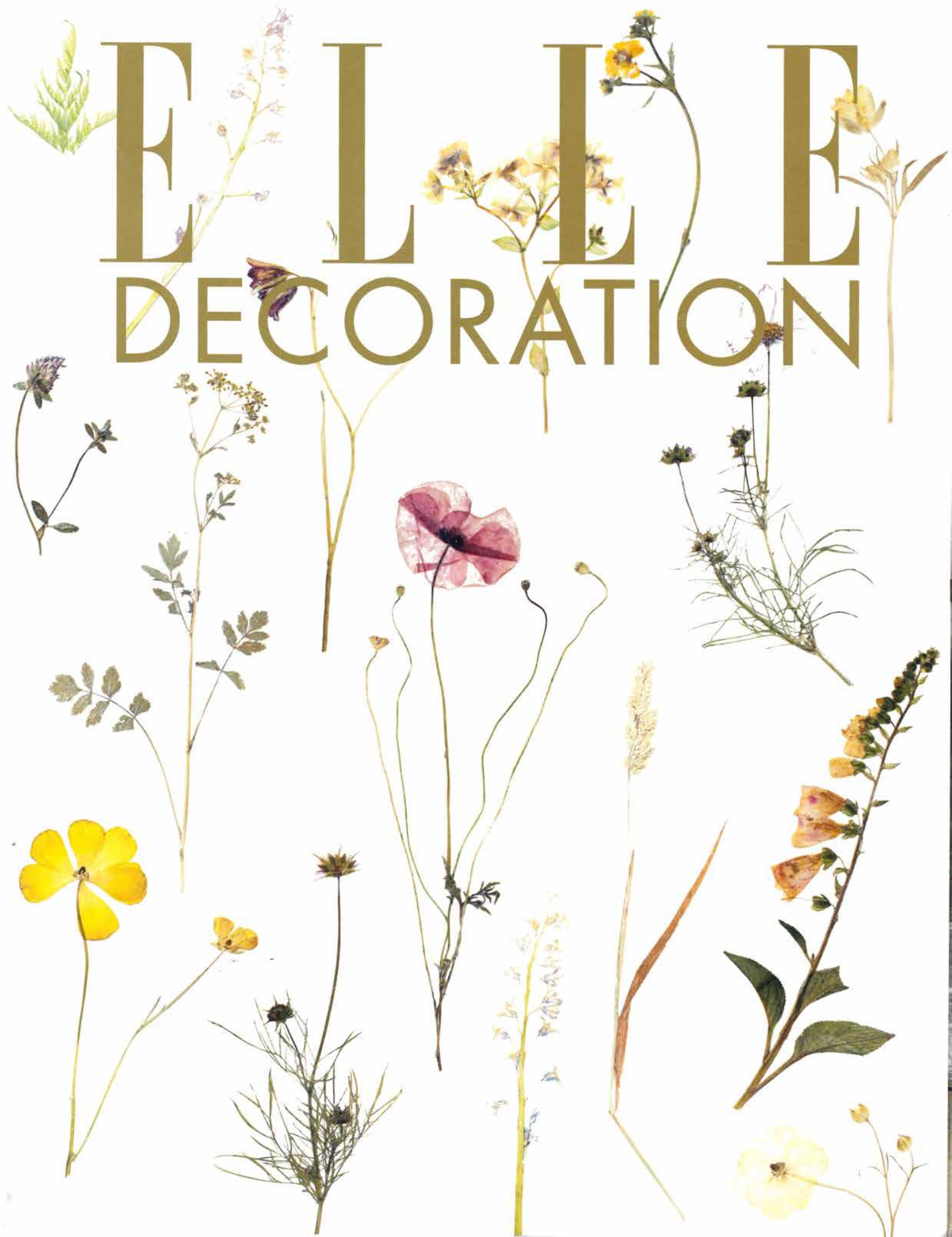


E L L E DECORATION



DECORATOR INDEX

WORKSTEAD

The American design studio known for its refined, context-driven projects and handcrafted details

Who are they? Husband and wife Robert Highsmith and Stefanie Brechbuehler (below, far right and far left), and Ryan Mahoney (middle), who all met while taking an architecture programme at the Rhode Island School of Design. Prior to that, Highsmith studied music, Brechbuehler worked at Michael Graves Architecture and Design practice and Mahoney was employed in theatre set and prop design. The trio founded Workstead in 2009. 'Our first design job was a small kitchen in a 1920s apartment in Brooklyn Heights,' recalls Highsmith. 'New York offered us a great platform with plenty of small-scale projects that we could dip our toes into.' Today, Mahoney and Brechbuehler head up the design studio, while Highsmith is in charge of furniture and lighting product development.

Define Workstead's style 'We share a similar sensibility and try to pay attention to the context and era of a building,' says Mahoney. 'That first kitchen was formative in terms of approach. We asked a local mill worker to hand-build the cupboards and created custom handles, tailoring every aspect to the client.' Whether working on a hotel, such as Rivertown Lodge in Hudson, where they commissioned pieces by local artisans, or the kitchen in a home on New York's 25th Street (below), for which they used bespoke metal cupboard handles, there's always an emphasis on the handcrafted.

Recent designs The Vintage Wine Bar in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which was influenced by Art Deco forms and features a walnut bar and the studio's own 'Signal' pendant lights. There's also The Dewberry in Charleston (above right) – their third hotel project, its interior explores the idea of Southern Modernism.

Current projects A 65-unit, 1930s residential development in Brooklyn that will feature pine flooring salvaged from a mill in Massachusetts, prewar-inspired ceiling mouldings and social kitchens with central islands and cast-porcelain cabinetry pulls. They are also working on a ground-up project, adding a new suite to a Shingle-style home on the coast.

They say 'We want to maintain the collaboration between the studio and our products: sometimes we use our furniture and lighting, other times, products are born out of projects. That interplay keeps things interesting.' workstead.com



EXPERT ADVICE

Ryan Mahoney and Robert Highsmith's tips on kitchen design

Be inventive with the layout Thinking back to our first kitchen in Brooklyn, we had to be really creative about how we used the space. We built most of the kitchen cupboards under the stairs to maximise storage. More recently, we worked on an apartment on New York's Upper West Side that was a *piéd à terre* for clients who live primarily in the UK. Every space had to double up as something else, so we created a countertop that extends and transforms into a desk for a laptop and a coffee table that elevates to become the dining table.

Think of a kitchen as a series of distinct elements Our design for the Workstead House in Charleston has a monumental round island, a 2.5-metre-long stove and a secondary butler's pantry. By breaking it down into different parts, you can create more unusual, exciting possibilities.

Consider materials We try to use materials that hold up and gain patina with age; we want a kitchen to be beautiful in five or ten years.

Don't underestimate the details Painting your existing cabinetry and adding a beautiful handle can make all the difference. For our 47 Plaza – a 1928 prewar apartment – we used painted cabinetry with a continuous band around the edge that turned into the wooden pull to open the doors. There was a play between the colour and the solid wood.

