

James Lane

— Design —

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MARK ZEFF

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Photos by Doug Young

Mark Zeff

Old Fashioned And New Colliding

By Ty Wenzel

Mark Zeff, whose namesake started 25 years ago, goes officially by MARKZEFF, and he heralds an international, multi-disciplinary, full-service, design firm based in New York City. When we say multi-disciplinary, we mean just that — the company employs architects, interior designers, graphic designers, and brand managers. Zeff started out as a residential designer and grew it into one of the nation's leading design powerhouses. The strength of his residential design expanded into commercial design and branding for which he has won many awards. Lucky for us, the Hamptons is a place where the greats, like Zeff, plant roots, ultimately finding themselves having a love affair with the region.

Mark, you won The International Hotel & Property Award for 2022 — congratulations! Can you explain for which project you won it?

I won best boutique hotel world wide for the Alila Maria Hotel, a Hyatt resort brand, that we designed in Encinitas, California. We also won best restaurant in a hotel world-wide for the Varga restaurant in that hotel.

Your work encompasses such amazing commercial projects, like renown restaurants, spas, hotels, and more. You also design stunning residential properties, for celebrities like Hilary Swank and other clients, with some in the Hamptons. We especially love your own home on the East End, which you named BLACKBARN. Where did the name come from?

I designed the house using the old Hamptons barn vernacular as an inspiration. I feel that the historic structures out here are really beautiful in their simplicity. The idea of a modern interpretation of the classic barn has always been a go to design aesthetic for me when designing houses in the Hamptons. I designed my first contemporary barn in Sagaponack and this was back in 2005. Since then I have continued to follow this passion to this day.

My modern farmhouse was built in 2014 and at that time black was unheard of to use the way we did. As a personal color that I love, my wife and I decided to experiment on painting our house black. What is wonderful about this color is how it blends into the landscaping and enhances the surroundings.

We nicknamed the house BLACKBARN and then went on to use this name for our BLACKBARN brand.

What are some of your favorite elements of the design for BLACKBARN?

Concrete floors are super organic and accentuate the architecture and interior elements. The ultra modern window system helps bring the outside in. The open loft like spaces and exterior courtyards are also a favorite.

Did you build it from the ground up or was it a reno?

Ground up in seven months.

Love the landscaping. Were you integral to the design or did you hire a landscaper?

Landscaping is one of my passions so this

is all on me — a true patience building life-long experience. We subbed out the entire project to a great team of subcontractors that I still work with to this day.

We love BLACKBARN's very personal expressive style while remaining very true to the East End landscape. The interior has touches of international worldliness mixed with a farmhouse vibe. As the designer, how would you describe its style?

I am a collector at heart, so most everything is collected over the years. My wife and I had many of these items in storage so we really built the house around these personal treasures. Mixing styles is my passion as it really inspires my sense of color, shape, irony, sensuality, etc. These elements all come to play a role. Not sure what to call this style so maybe it's IRONIC.

You have put a lot of emphasis on outdoor living in the build. Can you explain your modus operandi and how your friends and family enjoy it?

This is so important to me — we have kids and dogs so I created a series of outdoor courtyards, one being our extension to the house and is our outdoor living room. This enables the activities inside to meld with what is happening outside seamlessly, which includes cooking, playing, and just doing nothing. There is a pool courtyard as well as an entry courtyard — this idea is borrowed from traditional country houses in the 17th and 18th century.

How did your firm deal with the pandemic? Was it chaos?

It was a scary reality having to leave the city. We all sat down and decided that as we did not have any clear information for planning long term, it was decided that we would all disperse and work remotely. This has now become our way of working and having an office in Manhattan just for large meetings and client interaction if needed. I find this new way of collaborating rather refreshing and we all think productivity has increased this way.

How has interior design changed to accommodate that period?

I think that living away from the urban centers is more acceptable as a lifestyle, so clients are either relocating or upgrading existing country properties so that the country location is set up for more permanent style living. Kitchen upgrades and larger everything.

What are some trends that you feel are going out for 2023 and some that are coming in for 2023?

Trends — well, I hope we can be more brave and not follow the usual trends. I am always looking at innovation and hope that design can be inspired by this rather than a style trend. I do, however, hope more modern styling can be embraced.

What places, magazines, websites do you refer to to draw inspiration?

The United Kingdom, Europe, and South Africa are my favorite regions where the styles have influenced me.

The movie industry is also one of my favorite ways to enter different worlds and



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be inspired — this medium has always excited me. World Of Interiors magazine, Interior Design magazine and Hospitality Design for my industry are great magazines that I am always exploring for history and innovation.

Do you believe in the famous Hamptons light?

I have been coming to this great area since 1985 — it is truly magical in that the farms and the ocean sprinkled with the beautiful homes and gardens make for one of the most special places in the world. The light is truly a treat for me and I always find myself stopping to take it all in. I love the ocean and bay, and how they affect the East End in so innumerable ways.

For me the Hamptons is about the subtle aspects of what people out here do full time and how there is a history that most of the old families are really proud of. My barber is fifth generation and his grandfather started music at Pierson high school — every time we meet, we talk about his family that hail from Sag Harbor. This, for me, is what keeps the Hamptons set in its ways. I hope it stays this way. Old fashioned and new colliding.

To learn more, visit markzeff.com.

