

# Meet Uhuru: Design Founders Q+A

Uhuru Design's partners share how they've established themselves as one of America's most innovative design firms.



Sit down with Jason Horvath, Bill Hilgendorf and Daniel Husserl, the partners behind Uhuru Design, and it doesn't take long for the stories to start flowing about how Uhuru established itself as one of America's most innovative design firms. Fourteen years after Jason and Bill rented garage space in Brooklyn because they "had ideas and needed a shop," there are still plenty of tales to tell and passion that runs deep. Uhuru's influence on New American Design provides for a pretty interesting conversation about the maker movement.

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### **360: Take us back to the beginning of Uhuru.**

**Jason Horvath:** Bill can handle this. He's kind of our soul searcher.

**Bill Hilgendorf:** Jason and I studied industrial design together at RISD, and we both immediately moved to New York after we graduated. Jason worked for an interior design firm, and I worked building furniture for a cabinet maker. Pretty soon though, we started realizing that we had these ideas and we missed the facilities we'd had at school to build stuff. We needed a shop. We needed a place where we could bring these ideas to life. So, we convinced a couple of friends to go in with us on garage space on the ground floor of the building I was living in (at the end of 2003-2004 in Red Hook, Brooklyn).

Around the same time, another friend of Jason's from RISD connected us with his dad's ex-wife who had all these tools that she needed to clear out of a loft in SoHo. We told her we had the space and she just told us to take it all. It had been in storage for almost 15 years, but it was a whole wood shop of tools. That collection of tools – some of them eclectic but pretty complete – that was our original capital because we didn't have money. It was just one of those serendipitous things about New York, and that was the beginning.

### **360: Red Hook is sort of a hard-to-get-to corner of Brooklyn. What has it meant to you?**

**JH:** Like a lot of people, we're not from New York. But we've made New York home. And that's been something of a 15-year process filled with a lot of adventures. It's become pretty clear our company has been inspired by everything around us. Red Hook is a waterfront community. Our shop is literally on the waterfront. The Statue of Liberty is there. There are water taxis, cargo boats and ferries. It's a very unique part of New York. I think that the design we do is reflected in that very unique collision of the waterfront and this kind of hard-to-get-to community and then all of New York around it. It affects the way we think about design, like when Bill talks about the effects of nature on materials and aging over time. It's something we see constantly. I mean we have materials washing up in our backyards all the time. We have a bench in the shop right now that just came out of the water a couple of weeks ago. It remains a really important part of our story and as we grow we want to make sure we have a headquarters here and we remain from Red Hook.

**BH:** The combination of the built environment of New York where things are always changing – going up and coming down. There's the inspiration of the city that's constantly reinventing itself and remaking itself and moving with the times. Which is certainly something we're always thinking about. What's the next move? What's the next thing? But then we also have a location where we have pieces of what once was washing up on the beach. We're seeing the way things wear down and the effect of nature and water. It's an inspiring place.

### **360: How did that start manifesting itself in your work?**

**BH:** When we did the first collection, it was a combination of custom jobs we'd done and liked, and then pieces inspired by materials we had found on the streets and in dumpsters. Another amazing thing in New York is the spaces are so in demand and expensive that people are always parting ways with really good stuff. So that first collection was made up of things we found in dumpsters and buildings: beams of reclaimed lumber and iron fencing and all kinds of different pieces. That became our first collection and we started thinking "how can we build on that?"

**JH:** People loved that first collection and they wanted more, but unfortunately it was like that sophomore album problem. People loved the first thing we did, but how could we repeat that success without the same materials? What we realized though is that people loved the stories behind those materials, so the "narrative design" idea became something that we always went back to. Collection after collection, we'd start off by finding interesting materials to build with, whether it be Coney Island boardwalk planks or bourbon barrels from Kentucky (I'm actually from Kentucky). About once a year, we would design a new collection based on a new interesting material we were able to find. We stayed true to that model for quite a few years.

**BH:** Once we did that a couple of times, people got to know us as “the guys who like to use storied materials.” So people would start reaching out to us and say “Hey, I’ve got this battleship teak” or “Hey, I’ve got this crazy wood that came out of this building from 200 years ago.” Eventually, we asked ourselves how we can scale this in a way that isn’t dependent on limited collections or a crazy guy with a truck full of battleship teak. How do we create something repeatable? That’s when we started thinking about the work really being inspired by the narrative behind a process or a material. That’s when we started moving into things like the Fold Collection which comes from looking at old pallet straps and thinking about the forms that can be created from that. So, we had moved into this place where we could be inspired by a found object or reclaimed material, but the actual design pieces are repeatable.



**360:** With that in mind, how do you stay true to your “maker” roots as you grow? How do you make sure that “craft” remains at the center of your work?

**JH:** Craft is the thing that lets us continually elevate our product even as we start towards more mass-produced pieces. We were just in our Pennsylvania studio/factory last week, and we talked about the fact that there remains this culture of craft there. Where people still have a real passion for making things even if they’re making them at a higher volume. That’s something we care deeply about and something we need to keep.

**Daniel Husserl:** We think it’s important there’s a sense that craft is something of a lifelong pursuit of constantly learning. It’s an iterative process with the material rather than just something we’re doing in the moment. So even as we grow, our commitment to craft can deepen as we continue to work and learn.

**BH:** Something I loved in school was manufacturing techniques and understanding the processes of making stuff. So having an appreciation for how things are made – no matter the quantity – and having a passion for the new technologies, processes, efficiencies and understanding. If we can keep ourselves deeply engaged in the process and not just the final product, then I think we’ll be okay.

**360:** After all these years, what is the wildest thing you guys have built?

**DH:** What about the basketball hoops? The breaking glass thing.

**JH:** Oh, that was for an artist, Dan Colen, and we broke NBA backboards – like 50 of them. And then we glued them back together.

**BH:** We made a bunch of art fabrications, including curving them and putting them all together.

**JH:** What's the greatest furniture project we ever did? The first big hotel project we did was about 4,000 pieces of furniture, and we had never done anything at near that scale. We had a powwow when we first got the bid request and it was like, "Can we do this?" "Should we try?" "Yeah, we should probably try." It was definitely the scariest thing anyone ever asked us to build. But we did, and it came out tremendously. Now that's a big part of what we do and we learned so much. Usually, when we get challenged we grow a lot as a company.

And grow they have. In the 15 years since Uhuru first rented the garage space in Red Hook, the company has created products for clients around the world, appeared in galleries and museums, and added multiple facilities to their operation.

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