

Meet Detroit Wallpaper: Founders Q+A

How the founders of Detroit Wallpaper turn wallpaper into art.



Since 2004, Detroit Wallpaper has been transforming spaces with their unique artistic vision and e-commerce expertise. Inspired by its namesake city, the company has embraced advanced printing technology and bold creative energy to create unique and fully customizable products for clients around the world.

360 sat down with Detroit Wallpaper founders Josh Young & Andi Kubacki to learn more about the company and find out how they've managed to remain at the forefront of the wallpaper revolution.

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360: Let's start from the beginning—what's the Detroit Wallpaper origin story?

Josh Young: Andi had been working for a company that did more billboard-style printing. Super grand format. He'd come up as the design manager and eventually rose to vice president, so he was very familiar with all aspects of the printing business. Meanwhile, I was managing an internet-based golf equipment website. I had the idea to utilize the printing Andy was doing to create a large piece for our unfinished basement ceiling and that's when it hit me that this could be a business. It could be customized and people could pick their own images. I told Andy and he said, "That's a cool idea. Why don't we just focus on walls?"

We launched our first label, Great Wall, from our basement in 2004. Andy bought a printer on his credit card and we had one finishing table jammed into a corner next to the furnace and the storage area.

360: How did you initially find clients?

Andi Kubacki: The internet. We were pretty good with Google analytics and SEO stuff because Josh had been managing those campaigns for the golf website. We bought a collection of images from Getty Images and got some local business which gave us the operating capital to keep going with what we wanted to do, which was to print our own artwork. Fast forward a few years and we started doing a lot of wallpaper reproductions of things that were out of print. That started to build our reputation in the wallpaper industry. We became a best-kept secret for people who needed stuff recreated to finish a room. We were redrawing old patterns and supplying vintage options for mid-century modern and Victorian homes.

That parlayed into designers who were designing their own patterns contacting us for private-label printing. We did that for a few years, but they were paying us to print stuff that I knew we could be designing and creating ourselves. So, we started using more of my artwork and designs, and Josh used his internet background to allow us to start offering customization of the patterns and colors on our website.

JY: In 2012, we officially launched Detroit Wallpaper. We'd developed all these cool things and I felt like we needed to put it under a new label to give it the cool factor it really deserved.

AK: When we finally landed on the name Detroit Wallpaper, it was almost like a defiant choice. Like, this can happen in Detroit. Because at the time, design and creativity barely existed, and the whole city was scraping by.

360: What were your clients looking for?

JY: People were taking greater interest in their personal aesthetic and looking to customize their interior rather than going to big box stores to grab something off the rack.

AK: We forged solid relationships with interior designers, which brought recurring work for us, versus the homeowner who wants custom wallpaper every five years. The interior designer market was really good for us—it forced us to up our showroom representation and revamp our website several times.

JY: Over the past couple years we've slightly shifted to contract level—hotels and large facilities.

Getting those larger jobs allowed us to improve our equipment, update our software and get to an industrial production level. We still do lot with interior designers and retail clients. We like retail. Giving someone that custom experience is so rewarding because if they're happy and satisfied when the project's done, we get to hear about it.

360: How has Detroit's renaissance affected your business?

AK: I don't think it would've gotten the traction that it got in Detroit if we'd been living somewhere else. At that time, the community was trying to celebrate anything that was good in the city. We had a lot of camaraderie, even with businesses that were doing something similar. It gave us a little more energy and focus to feel like we were part of a common direction for the city.

JY: It also gave us more identity, because we were trying to concretize who we wanted to be aesthetically. It draws on so many inspiration points and cultural touchstones—music, science, architecture—and Detroit has always been a hotbed for that kind of invention and ingenuity. We're taking this very old-school product, wallpaper, and putting a contemporary spin on it through design, customization, and production methods, and that all feels like a Detroit thing.

360: Where are you finding inspiration these days?

AK: I've been getting back to basics, trying to instill more of a hand finish that's a lot richer. I have this drive to do modern versions of old master's type wallpaper where everything was hand painted and very lush with intricate detail. I'm trying to make it more approachable for modern, eclectic interiors.

JY: Andi's also been doing some really cool stuff with vintage imagery. He created a new pattern called The Wrong Brothers, a riff on the Wright brothers, that has vintage images of preliminary flying machines and contraptions. I'm not sure any of them ever got off the ground but it makes for a fun design. We have another called Hi Fi, which is a pattern of boom boxes that we've been hyping up on social media.

AK: Another new one, Bee Eater, has a more detailed, hand-painted look, with birds on a tree branch. It has references to vintage designs, but it's very clean and bright and not like anything that's out there right now.

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