

Shopping finds; unique bathrooms and kitchens; hot designers; lighting with flair

OTTAWA  
CITY

# INTERIORS

BEAUTY ON THE INSIDE

COME INSIDE  
Ottawa's hottest homes

\$5.50 2005 Edition



ARCHITECTURE ■ DESIGN ■ DÉCOR ■ ARTISTS



## Tripping the light fantastic

By Daniel Drolet

Photography Colin Rowe

**bakerygroup's edgy designs are injecting some real flair into the lighting scene: these are fixtures that get noticed whether the switch is on or off**

**Y**OU CAN START, IF YOU WANT, BY going to Il Negozio Nicastro, the hip new Italian food shop on Wellington near Island Park Drive. Don't go to look at the cheese counter, though, or the bistro menu or even that intriguing wall covered with cut log ends near the front window. Instead, tilt your head back and look up. See the clouds? The round plastic forms that hang below the lights and turn their incandescent glare into a warm glow? They're the latest work of a small Ottawa design firm called bakerygroup.

Never heard of bakerygroup? You haven't been listening. Their edgy, airy lamps are being made and sold worldwide by Prandina, a major Italian lighting manufacturer. They're now working with Cirque du Soleil, developing all manner of props for the Cirque's latest shows on board cruise ships. And they have contracts for custom projects for individual clients around the world. The original idea for the clouds at Il Negozio, for example, was first developed for a school library in Brooklyn.

ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT bakerygroup's Michel Du Vernet, Anissa Szeto, and Marcin Padlewski have quickly become players in the field of international design

It is said that fortune smiles on those who are prepared. And when things started to happen for them, Michel Du Vernet, Marcin Padlewski, and Anissa Szeto were ready—in just the right way. At the start just three kids with enthusiasm, bright ideas, and student loans, they became players in the field of international design not only by having good ideas but by being ready to turn them quickly into reality when lucky breaks came their way.

It started with tents.

Du Vernet, thirty-one, is a keen mountaineer. In fact, he spends most of his time working as a mountain guide out of Nelson, B.C., returning to Ottawa only in the off-season to work on product design and development. A few years ago Du Vernet, who had

THEIR WORKSHOP IS PART FUNKY  
STUDENT LOFT, PART GARAGE, PART  
OFFICE. ON A BARE WALL STUD IN

THE KITCHEN, SOMEONE HAS  
WRITTEN, IN FELT MARKER,

“GOOD DESIGN IS NATURAL”

dropped out after two years of studying engineering at the University of Ottawa, got to talking with Padlewski, a childhood friend, about designing portable shelters. Padlewski, thirty-two, and his wife, Anissa Szeto, thirty, are both Carleton architecture graduates and hadn't really settled into jobs yet. So they started exploring the tent idea. “We envisioned it being used for mining exploration, field hospitals, that sort of thing,” says Du Vernet in an interview at bakerygroup's workshop, a garagelike space in the Merivale Industrial Park. They developed designs and prototypes for tents that would weigh next to nothing and could be set up in a hurry. “We visited some potential investors, and it basically came down to ‘Go to the military and we'll talk,’” says Du Vernet.

That wasn't likely to happen quickly, so to earn money, they took on a contract to renovate the restrooms at the Mercury Lounge. A “chain of events, of unpredictable meetings that happen in life” is how Padlewski describes how they went from the restrooms of the Mercury Lounge to the design stores of the world.



The lights at Il Negozio Nicaastro on Wellington Street were originally developed for a school library in Brooklyn—the architect wanted children to be able to look up from their books and imagine the sky

ing. There's an office area in the loft above and a kitchen off to the side, with a water dish for Ziggy, Padlewski and Szeto's border collie-Lab cross. In the office area, amid the books on the shelves, one title sticks out: *Starting a Successful Business in Canada*. On a bare wall stud in the kitchen, someone has written, in felt marker, “Good design is natural.” Nature is a large part of their inspiration, says Szeto, along with the materials they are working with—“the nature of the fabric and how it reacts to tension, or plastic and how it reacts when you heat it up.”

They call themselves bakerygroup because “the way the workshop operates is the kitchen approach,” says Du Vernet, explaining that the materials are the ingredients they use in their recipes for new designs. The results are “not always tasty,” adds Padlewski.

The contracts still come by word of mouth. The work for Cirque du Soleil, for example, came via someone they'd worked with in Montreal. The clouds at Il Negozio were born of an idea an architect had for a school library in Brooklyn—he wanted the kids to be able to look up from their books and see the sky. Rob Nicaastro of Il Negozio says he heard about bakerygroup from his friend Luigi Meliambro, who had them design fixtures for his restaurant, Zibibbo.

“There's not too many people in Ottawa who do things like this,” says Nicaastro, who is pleased as punch with the new lights. “You almost have to come across them by accident.”

“Lighting is a very difficult thing to choose, especially in a place like Ottawa,” says Guy Bérubé, a Gatineau interior designer and art dealer who has called on bakerygroup several times. “They are the only one who can give you your own style. I think I've hit the jackpot with them.” Bérubé says the bakerygroup trio have a knack for communication—understanding what the client wants and delivering it. This may have to do with how disarmingly friendly and down-to-earth the three of them are. Padlewski says he remembers feeling, when the *New York Times* piece came out, how easy it would be to get drawn into the glamour part of design. They have made a conscious effort to turn away from that. They'd rather play.

Padlewski and Du Vernet haul down tent designs from a shelf in the office. “We're keeping the custom work stream as a main source of income to pay the bills,” says Padlewski as they show the tent ideas. “But on the side, we're focusing on things like the tents. We're not too concerned with remaining current with the lamps. We're concerned with making things that satisfy us in a creative way.” ■