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Jonathan Gordon (RIGHT) and Johathan (JR) Rohner, with colleagues from their team.

Instinct & Engineering

Design by the Jonathans: what every client wants

When interior designer Jonathan Gordon describes his firm's guiding approach, he doesn't reach for trends, style labels or signature looks. Instead, he returns again and again to a single word: Quality.

"We have a design philosophy, which is quality, effectively," he says. "You want a quality experience, whether it's the actual design experience, the products, the end results. We want our clients to love their homes, their places of business, anything that they're putting design work into."

Gordon is the creative force behind Design by the Jonathans, the fast-growing New England firm he founded in 2014 with his husband, Jonathan "JR" Rohner. The business began almost by accident—after a previous career path fell apart, Gordon's grandmother urged him to consider design. "I said, 'I don't know. Do I really want to do that?'" he recalls. A career counselor echoed the advice, but

internships were impossible to secure. "Nobody wanted me. I didn't 'look' the part."

After "probably 30 whatnot interviews," he stopped waiting for permission.

"I finally said to hell with that, I'm just going to hang my own shingle out there and see what happens." The name came later—thanks to JR, who insisted the business needed something memorable. "He said, 'Make it Design by the Jonathans.' That would get people's attention."

What began as a shoestring operation—"working part-time, making pennies"—is now a multi-designer team producing roughly 100 active projects a year across Connecticut, Massachusetts and beyond.

The 'chameleon' philosophy

Despite his own maximalist leanings ("a mix of High Victorian and Beaux-Art. Think like Paris Opera House"), Gordon is adamant that his job is not to impose taste but to interpret it. "We don't adhere to any one design style," he says. "We can adapt to any style that anybody wants and come

Lincrusta ceiling.
PHOTOS courtesy Design by the Jonathans



out the other side of it with something that can rival the best."

He calls this approach the company's "chameleon." Whether a client wants art deco, mid-century modern, updated farmhouse or classic New England, the firm adjusts—carefully balancing the aspirational with the realistic. "There is that factor," he notes wryly. "If you want a true high modern sofa from Italy, it's going to cost a lot of money."

But Gordon emphasizes practicality as much as polish. His advice for mixing high and low: "You throw on the high-end sofa, just don't use an Ikea nightstand next to it." Still, he stresses the firm's adaptability:

[CONTINUES 53]



Maritime design, Mystic, CT

Living Room, Fairfield, CT



Tips for working with an interior designer

Start early: “Start with your designer early, earlier than you think you even need to.” Involving design at the beginning avoids costly rework later.

Bring inspiration—but know why you like it: Find pictures of rooms you love, then analyze them. “What about it? Do you like the bed? The wallpaper?” Identifying specifics helps designers translate taste into the right materials and forms.

Be open to ideas outside your comfort zone: “All I ask is that they consider it.” Good design often emerges from options clients hadn’t imagined.

Balance investment pieces

with budget items: Mixing high-end and affordable can work beautifully—but “just don’t use an Ikea nightstand” next to a luxury sofa.

Trust the process and the tools: 3D scans, renderings, and live modeling sessions help you understand exactly what you’re getting. Engage with the visuals and give clear feedback.



Bedroom, Fairfield, CT



Bathroom, Fairfield, CT

"Granted, we've done rooms in Ikea, that's how versatile we can work."

Built from scratch, informed by engineering

Because Gordon never worked inside another firm, he built his own systems from the ground up. That reinvention helped push his business into technological territory most designers only recently began exploring.

"I started using things like 3D software before it was popular," he says. "I have an engineering background. I know how to manipulate these software packages. Let's just do it."

Today, his process starts with in-person meetings—"You have to meet your client. You have to know who they are"—followed by meticulous 3D scanning. For a recent sprawling property in Mystic, Connecticut, he completed 16 individual scans across multiple structures. "If I was going to measure by hand, it would've taken me two days."

Clients then receive photorealistic renderings, navigable panoramas and real-time walk-throughs where Gordon or a designer adjusts elements on screen. "I can drive through the model, make changes on the fly," he says. "Clients understand what they're getting."

For major renovations or new construction, the firm coordinates with architects and structural engineers—but Gordon's technical training means he's deeply involved in feasibility. "Anytime that any of my team members have a question on structure... they just come to me, and I'll take a good look at it."

Increasingly, the firm is also designing entire homes from the inside out. Rather than starting with an exterior shell, Gordon asks how people live: "How many people in your kitchen at a time? Are you eating in the kitchen? How many bathrooms? Who's going to be using them?" Only after the interior logic is sound does he shape the architectural form around it.

Award-winning adaptability

Though his personal taste leans ornate, Gordon's portfolio runs the gamut—from sleek mid-century kitchens to coastal

bathrooms, from reimagined post-and-beam homes to new construction modern farmhouses. Some of his proudest work involves historic houses in Mystic, where he either modernized gracefully or, as he puts it, "paid proper homage to the original architecture."

One standout project involved removing a structural post in a post-and-beam home—typically taboo. "We did it by installing a steel beam above it ... and it came out beautifully," he says. The project later earned major awards.

Another award-winner: a Connecticut whole-house redesign featuring a custom coffered ceiling using Lincrusta, grass-cloth walls and a painstaking blend of old-world millwork with modern luxuries. "Old meets new in every possible way," Gordon says.

Such breadth is the whole point. "Every possible type," he says as he scrolls through project images. "That's the chameleon."

Trust & timing

For all the technology and technical skill behind the work, Gordon insists that trust and timing matter most.

The number one regret he hears? "They always say, 'We wish we had started with you guys from the beginning.'"

Why? Because when designers join too late, they're forced to retrofit solutions. "We're already thinking about it as a unified project," he says. "Start with your designer early—earlier than you think you even need to."

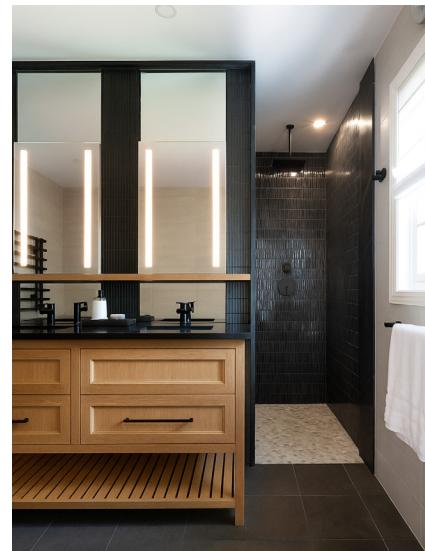
He also asks clients to stay open-minded. "All I ask is that they consider it," he says of his more daring ideas. "They can say no. But there might be things that expand the potential significantly of the space."

At the core of everything—firm culture, technology, craft—Gordon still comes back to the value that started it all: "Quality. Kindness, too. When people want to work for you, they produce good work. And that benefits the client substantially." ■

thejonathans.com

"You want a quality experience, whether it's the actual design experience, the products, the end results. We want our clients to love their homes, their places of business, anything that they're putting design work into"

Johnathan Gordon



Bathroom, Fairfield, CT.



Whimsical Safari Nursery