ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN AT ALL SCALES
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New Talent
Five Design Innovators to Watch

Alexander Girard’s Unseen Photography
MoMA Takes On Fashion
How the Guggenheim Got Built
Playing with the Pros

What’s the most important life lesson a design student can learn? You could make a case for highly conceptual theories about inspiration or creative flow. But what students at the Rochester Institute of Technology experience in a senior seminar called Metaproject is a dose of market reality: It’s not always about big ideas, but about how you meet a need.

Every year, Professor Josh Owen, who chairs RIT’s industrial design department, invites a manufacturer to share a specific challenge it’s facing in an upcoming product line. For Umbra, the Toronto-based housewares company that worked with Owen’s students this year, the problem was “designing for small spaces.” Once the objective is assigned, students immerse themselves in the company’s previous design collections, studying everything from aesthetics to viable price points. Then they spend their semester crafting prototypes that can fit stylishly and seamlessly into the firm’s next line. “We’re not just making stuff,” says Owen. “We want to add value.”

At the end of each Metaproject—and there have been seven so far—partnering companies sponsor a booth at ICFF each spring. There, students play the part of freelance designers and talk up their products to passersby. For some students, like Afifi Ishaq, who created a dodecahedron sticky-note memo ball for Poppin during last year’s Metaproject, the whole experience turns into something even more exciting than a life lesson: his first product on the market.

By Audrey Gray

Metaproject 07

01 Student: Brian Gusick
Project: Stackable Organizers

Umbra’s challenge for RIT seniors was to design for renters living, and Gusick tapped into experience as a student for reuse as an accent piece fit for a small dorm room or apartment. His stackable organizing systems can be layered over desks, tables, or even sliding out from storage spaces in utility units.

02 Student: Tulig Duffy
Project: Penny Rosette Divider

Duffy was able to identify and address a common rental dilemma: small mirror, big mirror. His portable and adaptable divider uses the same materials as expandable paper reflectors, offering a personal, extra take-out stand for privacy. Suddenly, any small room becomes a “room,” he says. “Wherever you need privacy.”

03 Student: Shih-Chieh Chen
Project: Polish Bullet

Just a little bigger than a coffee mug and designed to fit in a stack on top of tables, Chen’s “polishing vessel” is a portable solution in a range of minimalistic, hidden storage units. Designed for a cleaner, clutter-free and more organized workspace, the power tool is both a charging port and a cordability.

04 Student: Jon Forti
Project: Pop Self

Umbra’s M + D Design Matt Dorfman says the firm looks for qualities in materials, original, functional, affordable, and accessible. This year’s design goal was to develop a multifunctional folding table, which helps reduce the amount of space in small spaces, providing flexible storage potential, enhancing the utility of every available surface.

05 Student: Christopher Greene
Project: Rocket

Greene went into the market space and realized the tech markets very rarely the prototype, “Rocket” should fit anywhere is needed. The table features a beehive box, laptop, tablet, and phone. The seat—designed in the island—provides adjustable heights as well.

06 Student: Vincent Lin
Project: Hayop

Umbra’s Matt Dorfman chose the prototype by Liu for the company’s 60th anniversary celebration. “We were really investigating the idea between the table counter and the space under your table,” says Don. “By making this with a paper towel holder that went horizontal, we realized it could be a nice dish underneath it. We think it’s really great.”