



Interior designer and Farmer's Daughter Hotel model Meg Joannides is actually a scientist's daughter – which has served her well on the cutting edge of design and architecture

STORY BY LES FIRESTEIN
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first encountered interior designer extraordinaire Meg Joannides on the Hill House project, which was our cover story for the first issue of *The Riv*. Hill House was such an interesting and challenging interior design project because its design was so unique, it really couldn't be furnished with store-bought or even traditionally crafted pieces. The task of furnishing Hill House required new materials, new shapes, cutting-edge materials, and solving massive logistical challenges.

Throughout that interior design process,

I was amazed by Joannides's unflappability and sheer *capacity* to collaborate on the invention of a whole new design vocabulary, then help bring those futuristic parametric designs from the metaverse into reality.

Robin Donaldson is the architect of record on Hill House, as well as the second architect of record on the refreshing of the Graholm Estate, a seminal piece of American Spanish Revival architecture purchased by Hill House owners envisioning a reassemblage of that original and historically significant Santa Barbara estate.

"I think Meg can do anything, and the range of what she can do is impressive," says Donaldson. "One of the things I love about her is she has so many tools in her arsenal. She has a great eye, of course. But she also has a great ear, which is critical for listening to the clients and everyone else on the design team. Both those assets served her incredibly well on this very unique and challenging mission." And what was that mission, exactly?

## Mission Control Meets Mission Architecture

ruce Heavin and Lynda Weinman, the same entrepreneur-philanthropist-artists who built Hill House, also had the idea to refresh Graholm, one of Santa Barbara's original five Hilltop Baron estates. Graholm was an antiquated manse most would have relegated to the landfill but thankfully the Weinman-Heavins didn't. Early on, they made the decision to refresh Graholm and therein, instantaneously, a design challenge was born: How would these two estates from different centuries play together? Was it even possible? Now that both projects are almost complete, I'm happy to report Graholm is the greatest reconceiving of an old estate I've ever seen, and the two neighboring properties get along like the Louvre and I.M. Pei.

Before we look at the great job Joannides and her team did on *Graholm*, however, we must first look back at the amazing oeuvre that qualified Joannides for the *Graholm* gig in the first place.

Joannides, who hails from the Bay Area, attended UC Santa Barbara then FIDM, where she earned her degree in interior design. Joannides started in corporate design - but not just any old corporate design. Her career in design began at Ralph Lauren in Europe. In her own words: "I was in Munich on vacation during the summer of 1990 and just walked into the RL store in Munich on the Maximilianstraße, which is their Rodeo Drive. I got into a conversation with the manager of the store (she was American) and told her I was an interior designer. She told me the wholesale division was developing stores all over Germany and suggested I meet with the team. I just spontaneously decided to move to Germany in the fall of that year and take the job. I worked for them for two years all over Germany. I eventually left RL for Hugo Boss, where I worked three more years developing stores all over Europe and Asia. And then I spent another five

years developing spaces for Hugo Boss North America based out of New York City. For anyone in design, I highly recommend living in New York simply to learn the fast pace and just how to get things done. I probably did 45 stores altogether for Hugo Boss."

To summarize our story thus far: Joannides walked into a Ralph Lauren store in Germany, talked herself into five years of plum design jobs at RL, then Hugo Boss. Let's take that in for a moment. RL and Boss are two of the top design institutions not just to develop your design chops but to learn how to work in a buttoned-up manner, with tight budgets, and frequently many masters.

After years and many successes with Hugo Boss around the world, Joannides came home to California. Her first project in Cali was the Farmer's Daughter Hotel in Los Angeles (for which she was also the logo model). Farmer's Daughter was a weird-interesting design gig where hipster kids had inherited a literally by-the-hour Best Western from their folks. Do you know who rents a hotel room by the hour? It's generally not people stopping in for a quick nap.

Joannides took this Best Western, completely reconceived it with the new owners (twice), opened it up, and totally changed its energy. In the process, Farmer's Daughter helped bring about a resurgence to the surrounding Fairfax District. This sort of ability with alchemy would serve Joannides well years later at *Graholm*.

In the ensuing years, Joannides did a lot of successful residential projects all over the United States but especially along Southern California's many rivieri: Malibu, Santa Monica, the Palisades, Santa Barbara. And further rivieri, multiple projects in the Bay Area – not to mention the Persian Gulf riv known as Dubai. I ask Joannides from whence she draws inspiration. "I'm always looking for inspiration from the architecture," she says. "I want



Joannides was not just the designer of the Farmer's Daughter Hotel (a former flophouse) in L.A., she was also the model for its memorable logo.



## A Chronology of Motor City, 93108

The Unusual Automotive Pedigree of Montecito's Storied Graholm Estate

he storied *Graholm Estate* has a long legacy with the automotive industry, with an almost startling number of coincidences and convergences. There's a lot of fascinating Santa Barbara history up on that hill – and just a lot of fascinating history, period.

David Gray, who commissioned the building of *Graholm*, inherited his money from his father, John Gray, who was Henry Ford's main financial backer. John Gray's initial \$10,000 investment in Ford ultimately yielded him a \$36.5 million buyout (including dividends) when it occurred in 1919. To put this number in perspective, a schoolteacher in 1919 made about \$970 per year.

The reason for John Gray's windfall was Henry Ford had had a number of financial fallings-out with various partners and investors. For example, he had a falling-out with the Dodge Brothers who went on to form ... you guessed it. And he had another notable falling-out with an investor named Clarence Black, who promptly left Ford to start a company called Cadillac.

Before David Gray ever headed west from Detroit, the Cadillac baron Black had left Detroit first and built a Santa Barbara estate designed by famed architect Winsor Soule called *El Cerrito*. The foreman on *El Cerrito* was the architect Roland Sauter, who went on to both locate the *Graholm* parcel for David Gray and ultimately become that project's lead architect.

Sauter's firm notably did some other important architecture around town, such as Santa Barbara High School and the Cabrillo Pavilion on Santa Barbara's East Beach (currently the home of Reunion Kitchen + Drink). Gray gifted the pavilion to Santa Barbara.

David Gray, like the current owners of *Graholm*, was immensely philanthropic and deeply involved with supporting the arts in Santa Barbara. That was, up until June of 1925, when he refined his philanthropy to focus on helping Santa Barbara rebuild after the massive earthquake.

Gray embraced community organizer Pearl Chase's vision for the redevelopment of Santa Barbara in Spanish style, and to this end, Gray gave \$10,000 to help establish an Architectural Board of Review. Gray personally bore the cost of the operation of the community drafting rooms whose architects helped builders, owners, and fellow architects create designs in the Spanish revival style, a romanticized version of Santa Barbara's past. (Source: Hattie Beresford, the *Montecito Journal Magazine*, 2012/2013.)

Beresford, the *Montecito Journal Magazine*, 2012/2013.)

A quarter-century later, in 1952, *Graholm* would be purchased by the Brooks Family and become the Brooks Institute of Photography. Among the specialties at Brooks were popular courses in automobile photography.













The home went back into private hands in 1999, until it was eventually purchased in 2018 by Bruce Heavin and Lynda Weinman. Like Gray, *Graholm's* current owners are huge patrons of the arts and benefactors of Santa Barbara. In the runup to construction, of course, they wind up having to deal a lot with boards of architectural review — which ironically, and coincidentally, largely came into existence thanks to *Graholm's* original owner, David Gray!

One hundred years later. Heavin and Weinman throw a centennial birthday party for the house! They're not Steve Jobs! They engage Meg Joannides for the refresh — whose connection to the automobile industry is her father, Dr. Fritz Kalhammer, a renowned scientist who was integral to the development of the fuel cell (and the plug-in hybrid).

New owners the Weinman-Heavins are not uninvolved in the automobile business themselves. They are backers of Fisker Automotive, which is all about clean energy. Kind of similar to what's going on with the house — *Graholm* is being adapted to how people live today. The Fisker is for how people drive today (and can also power your home). Henrik Fisker, like Heavin and Weinman, is a veteran of the ArtCenter College of Design, though on the Swiss campus rather than the Pasadena campus (where Heavin and Weinman met). Fisker is also a car design veteran of BMW, Aston-Martin, and coincidentally, Ford. Speaking of which, the Ford Lightning F-150 all-electric pickup also claims it could power a home for a few days. So, it seems both Ford and *Graholm* are ready for 2023 and beyond.



my work to harmonize with the architecture, creating a seamless transition between interior and exterior. Clients inspire me. I study them, how they dress, how they currently live, what their visions are, what they do for a living, and how that informs their lifestyle.

"I also travel a lot and take tons of photos. I am often scrolling back through my phone to my travels for inspiration – could be colors from a hotel lobby. Or the particular way a piece of furniture is detailed. A view. A piece of art. A mood created by the weather or the way a building is lit. The way I feel when I'm admiring my surroundings."

As she gained notoriety, Joannides eventually landed on the radar of Heavin and Weinman, who auditioned Joannides on smaller projects before bringing her in on the epic Hill House.

Heavin and Weinman had the Hill House build and the *Graholm* refreshing – two structures from two different centuries - going on side-by-side and simultaneously. Talk about a project that needed "mission control." Hill House was Heavin's baby, while the redo of the Brooks Institute, aka *Graholm*, was thought to be more Weinman's. Of the two simultaneous mega projects, architect Donaldson says cheekily, "Meg has incredible capacity, is not easily daunted, and doesn't come in with a big ego or a lot of agenda. Luckily, she leaves that to us."

 oannides says: "Growing up the daughter of a physicist and lawyer definitely didn't hurt." (Her father had a lot to do with the development of the fuel cell and invention of the plug-in hybrid). "Because really there's no rendering, no matter how good, that can show you everything you need to make informed decisions. So I'm a huge fan of mocking up, and I'm a really big fan of the on-site lab. Especially with clients, in my opinion, there's no substitute for the sensory, tactile experience of on-site prototyping."

I ask Joannides how the project at *Graholm* differed from the futuristic Hill House project across the meadow. "Only in every conceivable way," she says.

"But was it less daunting because you had this one [Hill House] behind you?"

"If anything, I think *Graholm* was *more* daunting," she says. "Because we had this heritage that (a) needed to be brought up to snuff – no small undertaking. Plus (b), there was a lot of oversight because *Graholm* is an historic, important, legacy Santa Barbara property, which is something the clients loved about it as well. And we very much wanted to honor that."

And let's not forget the additional challenge the refreshed *Graholm* needed to play nicely with this visitor from the future (the already iconic Hill House) parked right next door. "On top of all that," says Joannides, "I wanted to honor this great site and this great architect – *both* great architects, really: Roland Sauter and Robin Donaldson. This property has just been so defining to Santa Barbara – both then and now."

As for differences in executing the two projects? Joannides says, "I guess you could say Hill House was made from whole cloth while with *Graholm*, we were working with old cloth. The biggest difference manifested in how people live today versus when Sauter built *Graholm*. Obviously, a lot has changed over the course of a century."

Translation: In the 1920s, brick shithouse architecture was in vogue versus the net-zero architecture and "living light upon the land" that's celebrated today.

"When *Graholm* was built, heritage design was all about massive timbers, exposed structural members, and windows seemingly built to repel invaders," says Joannides. "Think about how over at Hill House, you're trying to have the least amount of window stile or muntin. While when *Graholm* was built, the style was to have, basically, the most. There's more metal in the windows at *Graholm* than in most new cars at this point."

Les Firestein: But you had that experience early on in your career with the Best Western. You knew Graholm could be transformed.

Meg Joannides: That was different. With the Best Western/ Farmer's Daughter, there was nowhere to go but up. *Graholm*, on the other hand, was one of the original Hilltop Baron estates of Santa Barbara. David Gray was literally this vaunted figure who wrote checks to subsidize the rebuild of Santa Barbara and support the aesthetic vision of Pearl Chase after Santa Barbara's 1925 earthquake. And the original architect Sauter built all these historic buildings like Santa Barbara High School

e love the original bones of Graholm, but quite a few were in total decay and disrepair. There had also been 100 years of remodels and patches - some sensitive, some not - and as we peeled the layers, we also revealed serious infrastructural shortcomings. In the rear-view mirror, this was possibly a teardown, but how lucky were we to save this rare jewel and polish her up again? The grounds and the site are so breathtaking, and she was begging to be brought into the 21st century. Everyone who walks in is struck by the humanity of this architecture, and the house feels instantly comfortable and familiar. We weren't afraid to mix a little modern with traditional, and Meg and I were inspired to create something that took a few risks and didn't go purely traditional and restorational. We loved saving the tile that had been hidden under carpet and restoring the original fireplaces, but added modern amenities such as air-conditioning and up-to-date plumbing. It was a joy to work with everyone involved - we only wish it could have gone faster. Anyone who has ever undertaken a remodel of a 100-plus-year-old historic home has a few battle scars and knows it is a labor of love and not for the faint of heart."

- Lynda Weinman





and the Cabrillo Pavilion on the beach, not to mention the whole signature Santa Barbara look of building with raw-edged, lichen-stained sandstone. Sauter's shoes were some big shoes to fill.

LF: So what were some of the solutions?

MJ: Those massive trusses supporting the roof – we painted them out. We "uncomplicated" a lot of things. Robin Donaldson provided incredible support, and we were in perfect sync about where to do new and where we keep old. And Unander (the contractor) was great – they're like an army of surgeons, and I think they care as much about preservation and building integrity as anyone.

LF: The result is incredible. The place truly looks like it was built today or 100 years ago. But the two eras are not at all in conflict – by God, you reconciled them!

MJ: A lot of it was about pulling certain design cues throughout the house for cohesiveness. It's about creating a single vocabulary and sticking to it. And so much has to do with the team. We found a great lighting design team (Lighting Design Agency, based in Switzerland) that presented fixtures and a lighting scheme appropriate to both centuries Graholm straddles. Bernard (Trainor, the landscape architect) has been really helpful getting the two parcels to talk to each other. And his work is so timeless, it kind of transcends any specific era. Granted, that's exterior work, but it makes a big difference in terms of a person's experience from inside.

LF: But you also had the additional issue that this property was an estate, then for many years an institution (the Brooks Institute of Photography). And then it went back to being an estate. I'm sure that presented its own challenges.

MJ: Sure, there were challenges of it being a college for 50 of its 100 years, but we try to convert the life this building lived – and the scars picked up along the way – into assets. There is this great Batchelder floor tile throughout a lot of the house that developed a marvelous patina, which couldn't have happened unless 50,000 students had traipsed through here for 50 of Graholm's 100 years. And I think that's part



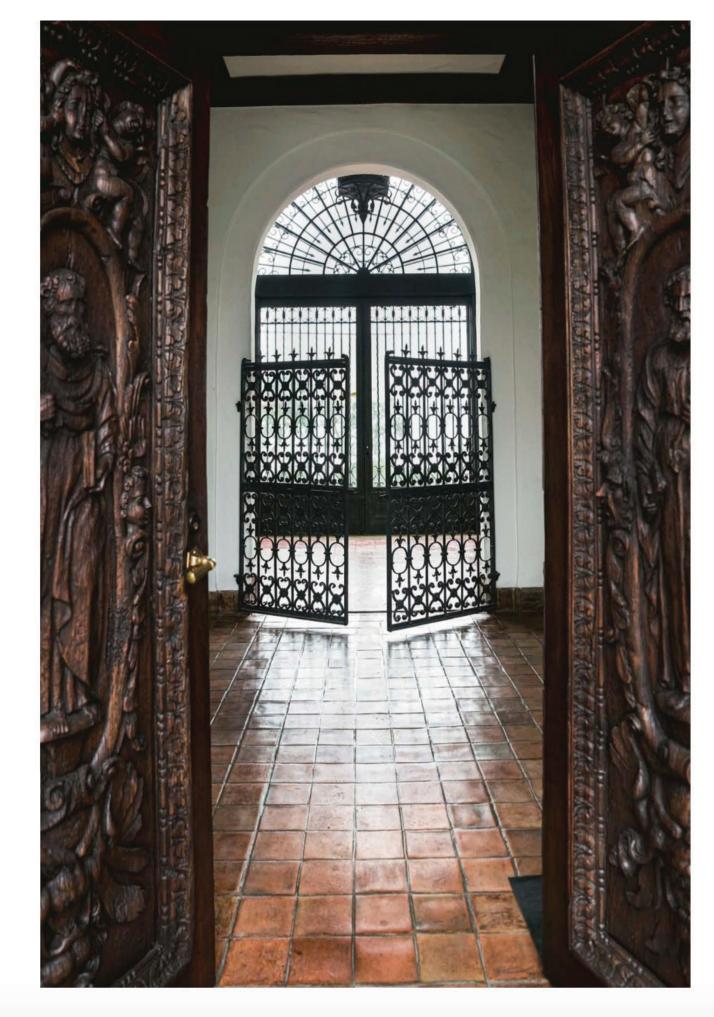
Joannides's blend of old and new is seamless.

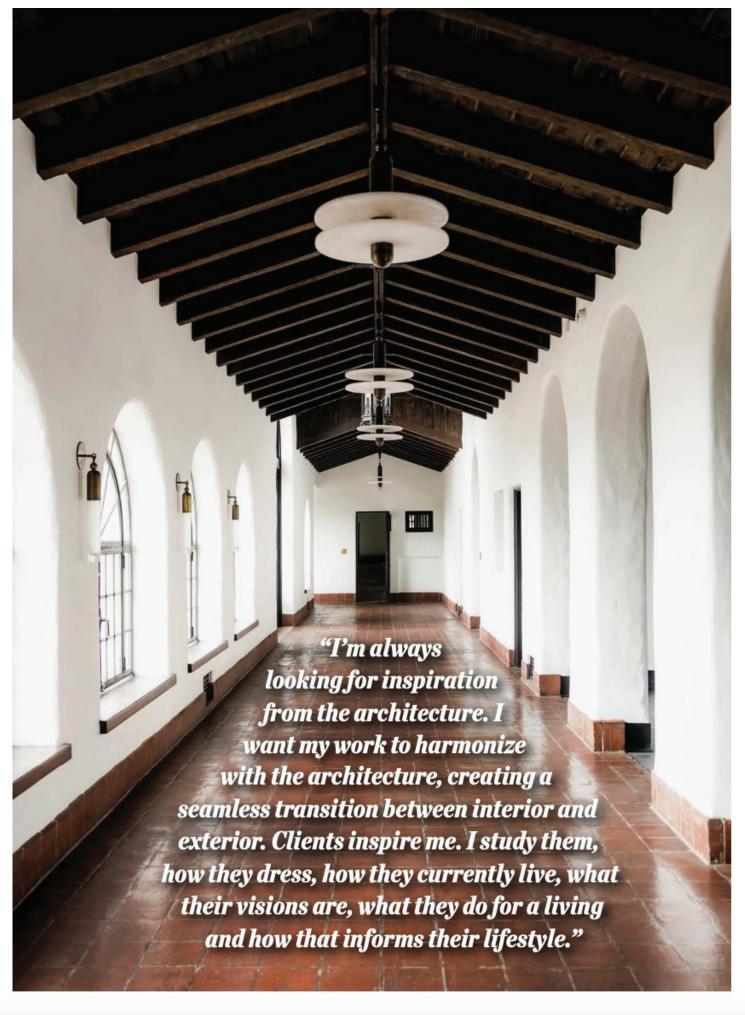
Architect Robin Donaldson says cheekily, "Meg has incredible capacity, is not easily daunted, and doesn't come in with a big ego or a lot of agenda. Luckily, she leaves that to us."

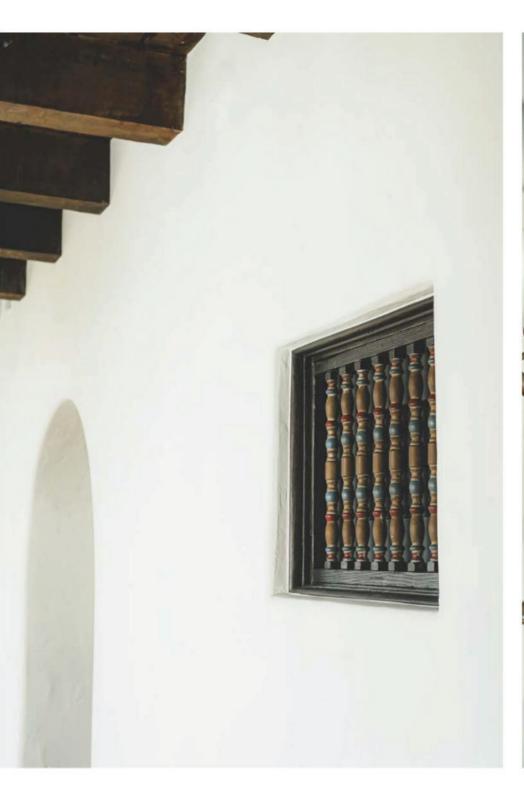




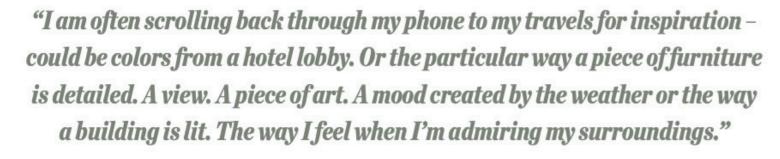
Joannides at Field+Fort, Just because,













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of what gives the place its gravitas – it looks like it has endured, and it really gives off the vibe that it was always here and always will be.

LF: What's your big takeaway from these duel epic projects on Eucalyptus Hill?

MJ: I've been incredibly lucky to work with clients who are not just amazing collaborators but true stewards. They are patrons in the truest sense of the word. Think of what Steve Jobs did tearing down that George Washington Smith mansion in Woodside (see "Did Steve Jobs Hate Montecito's Most Revered Architect?" in *The Riv's* Spring 2022 issue). This is not that. Like the original homeowner here, David Gray, Bruce and Lynda have chosen to deeply support the arts not just nationally but especially lo-

cally. Just on this site alone they've made two incredible architectural contributions to Santa Barbara and to the world, and I'm so honored to have gotten to be a part of that.

LF: But you're opening an office in Austin. Does this mean there could be a Megzit in your future?

MJ: Nothing so dramatic as that. We will always have an office in Southern California. But one of my senior designers decided to move to Austin, and I did not want to lose her. I was already aware of the growth in the area and the many great designers and architects working there, so we took the plunge and opened an additional office. It's all very new and exciting, but I am confident it is the right place for us to be considering the kind of work we see happening there now.







