

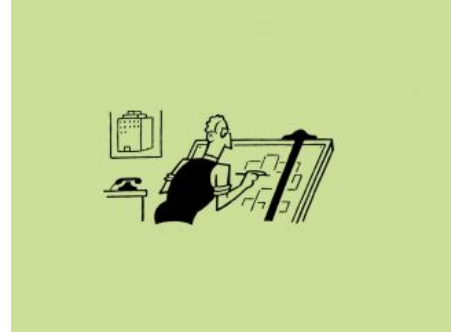
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DOOR TO DOOR

BY ANDREW MARANTZ

The architect Peter Pennoyer designs town houses, country houses, and beach houses for the rich and aesthetically conservative. His face is framed by a Tom Brokavian sweep of silver hair, and he favors loafers and spread-collar oxford shirts. Pennoyer's friend Sigourney Weaver once wrote, "Like a summer's day . . . his homes seem to have existed forever." This is intentional. "As an architecture student at Columbia, I was quite taken with modernism," Pennoyer said recently. "I did a loft once that was completely minimalist—no doors, white resin floor." After a while, though, "those experiments came to seem arbitrary, and I returned to Greek and Roman forms, which is where I now draw much of my inspiration." He is known for his scholarly attention to detail: knurled doorknobs, cabled fluting, pineapple finials.



In 2004, while designing a town house on East Seventy-ninth Street, Pennoyer encountered a novel challenge: "The clients requested a greater number of mezuzahs than I had ever heard of." Pennoyer is Episcopalian. "I was familiar with mezuzahs, but I knew very little about them. I started doing research."

In Deuteronomy, God instructs the Israelites to affix His holy words "upon the doorposts of thy house." Eventually, rabbis specified which words, exactly, and how to affix them: the modern custom is to place a parchment scroll inside a small decorative case—a mezuzah—and screw it to the doorjamb at an angle. Some secular Jews go mezuzahless or make do with a single mezuzah on the front door; Orthodox Jews, or those with a liberal parchment budget, mark every room larger than sixteen square cubits. Pennoyer's clients were quite observant. "They wanted one on every door except bathrooms and closets," Pennoyer said. "Fifty-two in all."

"I'm hoping an internship will lead to full-time copying."

The Talmud is silent on the question of mezuzah design, and, to Pennoyer's dismay, contemporary vendors seemed inclined toward kitsch. "We wanted it to look exactly right," he said. "We tried Manhattan Judaica shops, online auction sites, MezuzahStore.com. We could not find anything that wasn't terribly, unacceptably ugly." Pennoyer made a few drawings, and the clients chose a design that was formal but not ornate—a stripped-down four-inch Doric column made of brass, to be mortised into the doorframes. A metal shop in Brooklyn made the mezuzahs and shipped them uptown, and a rabbi said a blessing over each one as it was installed.



Eventually, Pennoyer designed a line of artisanal mezuzahs, which he hopes to sell on the Internet. "I never set out to be a mezuzah salesman, but why not?" he said. Pennoyer's firm now sends digital files to Lowe Hardware, a high-end metalworking company in Maine. "They have this machine that is essentially an automated lathe," Jim Taylor, a partner at Pennoyer's firm, said. "They feed in a cylinder of brass, and out comes the exact shape you've designed."

Pennoyer recently purchased a 3-D printer for his own office, on Park Avenue South. He uses it to print scale models of upcoming projects as well as life-size prototypes of custom doorknobs and cornices and mezuzahs. Unlike the lathe in Maine, his machine is additive: it builds from the bottom up, using thin layers of hard plastic resin. "It's a way of holding the thing in your hand, so you know what you're going to get," Pennoyer said. Once the client approves it, the files are forwarded to Lowe and the shape is reproduced in metal.

One recent day, Pennoyer agreed to show off his printer. The machine was in a back hallway, near the mailroom; it was labelled *Objet Eden500V* and looked like a miniature black coffin. Dan Berkman, the office's 3-D-printing maven, brought a thumb drive from his desk and inserted it in the machine. "That walk is the only low-tech step in the process," said Pennoyer, who had rolled up his sleeves for the demonstration. The printer began to spit out the specified shape: a life-size model of an anthemion, a floral ornament in the Greek Revival style, which would sit atop a cornice.

Earlier, to make sure his side business in Judaica was kosher, Pennoyer had asked Berkman, who is Jewish, whether he knew any rabbis. Berkman suggested his wife's cousin Julian Cook, a Reform rabbi in Denver. Taylor sent Cook an e-mail with a few renderings attached and asked "whether our design meets the generally accepted standards for a mezuzah." Cook responded, "I looked at your photos and drawing carefully (this is very nice, by the way) and it's absolutely fine." ♦



Andrew Marantz is on the editorial staff of *The New Yorker*.
