



DESIGN

Fernando Mastrangelo, Design Dissident

A perennial rule-breaker, Fernando Mastrangelo has become disillusioned with the long-established customs of the design sphere. In this exclusive interview, the Brooklyn furniture designer diagnoses the larger problem at hand and explains how he positioned his growing studio to tackle the challenges that lie ahead.



In the dead center of Manhattan, at the point where Broadway and 45th Street converge, a peculiar sight looks slightly out-of-place. House-like in appearance, the structure is attracting the neighborhood's sea of inquisitive onlookers like magnets. The pattern on its facade seems to depict a horizon of distant mountainscapes on an overcast day. [Fernando Mastrangelo](#), dressed in head-to-toe black, stands well-postured in front, creating a scene not unlike German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich's seminal *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. The visitors meander down a lushly landscaped entrance path, suddenly immersed in the mystical grandeur of nature within one of the world's most chaotic places: Times Square. At the house's rear door, people emerge in almost childlike wonder. But the trance doesn't last *too* long. The selfie snapping soon resumes.

The curious pop-up is called [Tiny House](#), the latest project by Fernando Mastrangelo. During this year's NYCxDesign, the Brooklyn furniture designer is thinking outside the trade show booth in favor of a more unorthodox approach to share his studio's work. It's an intrepid move—Mastrangelo is a seasoned veteran of Collective Design and [Sight Unseen Offsite](#), both of which attracted serious foot traffic in years past but are currently on hiatus. In Mastrangelo's eyes, the design fair's days are numbered. The next generation of buyers "is not interested in walking through a booth-filled convention center where they don't feel connected to the experience," he tells me over whiskey at Grand Republic Cocktail Club, one of his favorite hangouts in Greenpoint. "They want to travel to see and interact and participate in the things they love." Hard to argue with his sentiment given Tiny House's stream of spellbound visitors.



Fernando Mastrangelo in front of Tiny House in Times Square, New York, with landscape by Brook Landscape. All photography courtesy of FMS.

further reaches of East New York, Brooklyn, and used the extra space to establish [In Good Company](#), a curatorial platform and annual exhibition (this year's edition curated by [Rossana Orlandi](#)) that champions his tight-knit community of emerging designers. He then re-allocated his entire marketing budget to launch [FMS Presents](#), an in-house content channel that uses YouTube and IGTV to share his studio's happenings and discuss the business of design with his contemporaries. With these two burgeoning platforms forming dynamic new cores of his business, Mastrangelo is well-positioned to have his name in lights—quite literally. On Tiny House's opening night, his studio's name and Instagram handle flashed above on one of Times Square's flickering electronic billboards, bathing the entire spectacle in a sea of ambient glows. When it closed up for the night we headed across the bridge to drink whiskey and discuss the project, experiential design, and, as he tells it, the forthcoming Fairpocalypse.



Fernando Mastrangelo's Tiny House.



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How did the idea for Tiny House unfold? What were some of the biggest challenges?

Honestly, the biggest challenge came from the opportunity to show in Times Square, which inherently spawned our desire to take this project to the next level.

conversations with media companies, and called almost everyone we thought might be helpful. We started that whole process 60 days before installation. I reached out to Anne-Laure Pingreoun from Alter Projects and Steve Lastro from 6Sides, both of whom I've known for years but hadn't yet had the chance to work with. Anne and Steve know how to bring projects to life with strategic partnerships and sponsors. We all rallied to get Tiny House in front of the right audience.

This was the first time FMS had ever attempted a pop-up like this. I've always believed in throwing us into the lion's den and seeing if we can survive. What emerged from all these firsts is that we're now well-versed and confident when it comes to executing wild conceptual projects.

You seem to be developing a taste for these environmental installations.

I'm looking to use the language I've created through my sculpture and furniture practices in new and interesting ways. This has led me to a newfound fervor for designing experiential spaces. At last year's Collective Design, I designed a booth called *The Dream* that was inspired by a Henry Rousseau painting; it was a space designed to evoke the lush feeling of the sun setting in the jungle. This year, I designed the Art Basel Lounge for Audemars Piguet which will travel the world. It also transports its visitors, but this time to a Swiss mountain range.

Tiny House is an expression of my vision for physical spaces. Honestly, it's a ton of fun. Using design to help a brand tell a story or help a space impart genuine feelings is the type of challenge that most excites me for the future.

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Fernando Mastrangelo's "The Dream" installation at Collective Design 2018.

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Do these types of experiential projects help your bottom line?

I want to expand and diversify what FMS offers, and how we offer it. A company that relies solely on one market may have trouble making it through tough times. We have to remember that we've been in a bull market for almost a decade and that is coming to an end. When you're a small business you need to stay nimble, have core clients, diversify your offering, make secondary income from licensing deals or whatever it is that helps you stay afloat while the economy goes through its natural turmoil.

I also want to remind myself and others in the industry that independent studios do not need to remain relegated to one specific concentration. They can become dynamic, multi-faceted companies in their own right. I want to make rugs, wall coverings, a pop-up house in Times Square, a web-series, a non-profit showcase, AND a furniture collection. This also keeps FMS from becoming boring and keeps us from getting bored.

In a way, Tiny House is democratizing design—an industry often restricted to the wealthy.

Although Tiny House wasn't designed to that end, it's an installation that everyone can enjoy and experience. I can't imagine it any other way. Visiting Tiny House is an interactive—not transactional—experience. You can't purchase it. You don't have to know anyone to get in. You don't even have to be well-versed in the history of art and design to enjoy it. It's not elitist or expensive. It's simply a unique experience for anyone who wants to visit it. I

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I remember first meeting you at Collective Design 2016, when I interviewed you about the Drift Collection. You're not participating in any fairs this year. Why?

The fair model is dying. Point blank. It's very hard to make money unless you're Art Basel or Merchandise Mart. Many of the smaller fairs are hoping to be bought by the big guys so that they don't have to worry as much about profitability. The fairs currently play a huge role in our industry, but this is not the model for the future. As the market shifts, new trends start to emerge and social media allows for growth and visibility to proliferate. We're going to start seeing new approaches take hold very soon.



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The Vallée. Fernando Mastrangelo's lounge concept at Art Basel Hong Kong with Audemars Piguet

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The Vallée, Fernando Mastrangelo's lounge concept at Art Basel Hong Kong with Audemars Piguet.

The term “fairtigue” has been bandied about a lot recently around *Surface’s* office and industry gatherings.

I don’t know a single person who doesn’t have “fairtigue.” Are we just going to continue to be bored by another art or design fair where we see the same artists and designers being promoted and sold to the same small group of collectors? People tend to forget that, in ten years, the kids who grew up with Snapchat and Reddit will be the people with the purchasing power, and those kids are not interested in walking through a booth-filled convention center where they don’t feel connected to the experience whatsoever. They want to follow an artist’s journey and get to know the person behind the work.

We’re in a purgatory period. While the old-school model has grown to immense proportions (Gagosian, Zwirner, Hauser & Wirth in the art world and Carpenters Workshop and David Gill in the design world), they have all taken such massive market share that the little guys who actually invigorate the market have started to die. But the little guys won’t be little forever. They’ll eventually sneak up and collapse the big guys in one fell swoop.

Disruption.

We see this in all other industries. The taxi industry, which once owned all the medallions in New York City, is now a joke compared to Uber. Once Casper launched a bed in a box, suddenly Mattress Firm is out of business. Giants that seem insurmountable become these frail entities that can’t pivot fast enough to keep up. Blockbuster, K-Mart, Barnes & Noble... the examples are endless. I view these galleries and fairs the same way. They seem

and the museums. These people are connected not because of the actual *art*, but because of how it makes money, and how easy it is to drive an unregulated market into the stratosphere with unrealistic pricing and price fixing.



Fernando Mastrangelo's Reverence rug collection for Edward Fields.

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Are you going to lead the revolution?

I'm sitting back and slowly building my personal brand, my studio, and my artistic vision, while trying to push myself out of the commonplace approach to the future of art and design. I don't want to be part of a fair that people are bored to walk through. I don't want

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shift.

I believe independent studios can become the cultural juggernauts that are fueled by social media reach and creative studios can band together to put on independent events that activate their audience. Look at Glossier and Supreme; they each disrupted their industries and have taken market share faster than their industries were even able to comprehend. This is about to happen to art and design.

I'd like FMS to be at the forefront of whatever the next evolution of the art and design world looks like. We're putting ourselves out there by trusting our gut and going against the ever-so-powerful tide.

I notice you have a shoppable storefront at the 1stdibs Gallery. How is that business model different?

1stdibs is a perfect example of a disruptive company. 1stdibs is a marketplace that got almost the entire industry onto the platform, and figured out how to monetize through different business models. They know, through data, how people shop, what they are looking at, and how they buy. They basically know everything about the consumer. This enabled them to break the barrier for high-end purchasing online. It's been major, and the storefront is just another way to give the consumer what 1stdibs knew they wanted: the ability to see the pieces in person. They rent space to vendors that consumers already love, and make the purchasing fast and convenient.

I can buy all my home furnishings at 1stdibs and feel like I got the best of the best. It's fast, easy, and is almost like walking around a permanent art fair. I'm actually impressed by the entire idea and signed on because it's a perfect extension of what people want today. Do I feel like it's the future of furniture retail? Not at all. But it's the best option for this particular moment and I'm interested to see if this model can expand into other markets that aren't as voracious as New York. 1stdibs is a smart company, but we're in two completely different ball games. I'll continue to support 1stdibs because it helps complement my sales strategy, but doesn't dominate it.

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Fernando Mastrangelo's Ghost Dining Table.

I've noticed the fair landscape is getting leaner—Collective and Sight Unseen are both taking years off. Why do you think that is?

Money.

What does a fair-less design landscape look like?

We're trying to figure that out right now.

Well you launched a media arm, so you must believe that is part of the equation.

I created a company called FMS Presents that produces and distributes content about everything happening at the FMS studio. We've also begun to build FMS Presents into a business model that helps other artists and designers promote themselves. I believe wholeheartedly that every brand needs to make content a focal point of their creative strategy if they want to be successful. There's no escaping it.

FMS Presents documents and shares everything we're doing through Youtube ([FMS Presents](#)), Instagram ([@fmspresents](#)), and IGTV ([@iamfm](#)). We also have a podcast ([In Good Company](#)) where I interview designers about the business of being an artist.

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In Good Company is also taking off. It has become an occasion—pig roast and all—and a way for you to engage with emerging design talent. What can we expect this year?

Rossana Orlandi! She's our guest curator and I couldn't be happier. It'll be her first time curating a show in the United States. It's a great honor for Europe's queen of design to put her impression on young American designers and share her view of what the scene is all about. Another new element of IGC this year is the IGC Prize. We're awarding one designer with a cash prize that'll help them launch a collection or get their studio off the ground. This is all very exciting and I can't wait until September because putting together the In Good Company show makes it such a fun time of year for us.

I hate to even ask because you have so much going on, but what's next?

I have a multi-staged project in the works. FMS will be out of this world in 2020. That's all I can say for now.

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