

A Design Showdown

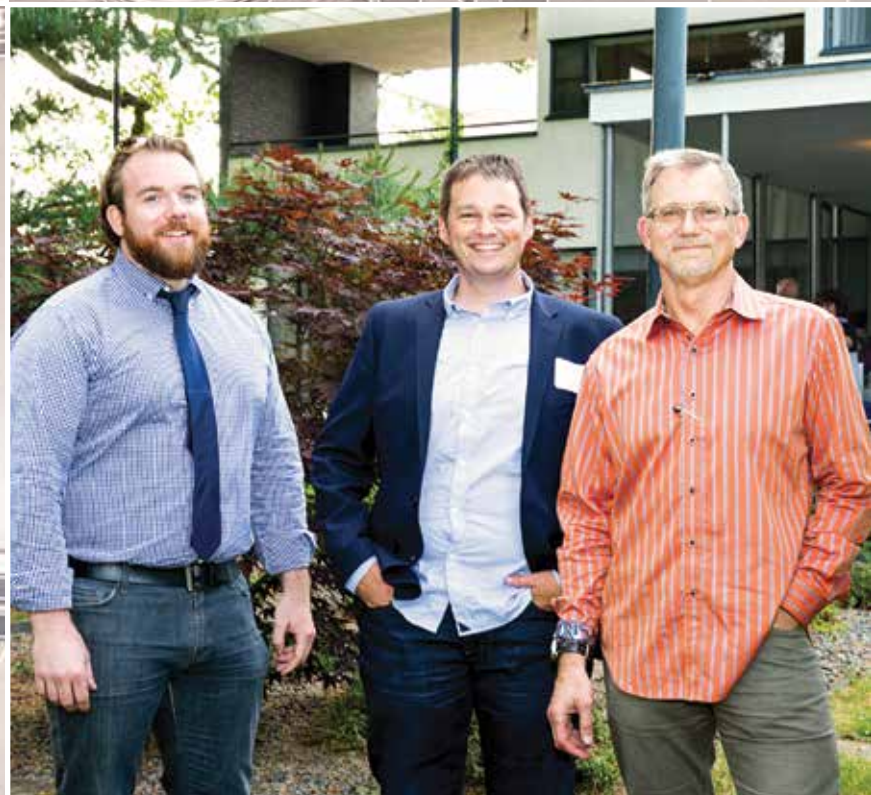
One niche publisher discovers the power of a breakthrough event.

By Molly Campbell

In the beginning of 2014, I knew I was going to need to get creative. At *Design New England (DNE)*, we had a chain of major transitions, one after another. First came the unexpected departure of my predecessor. Then, I was promoted to publisher. And, The New York Times Company sold The Boston Globe (our parent company, subsequently renamed Boston Globe Media LLC) to John and Linda Henry. In the end, *DNE* had a solid team in place for the first time in a long time. But — as things like this tend to go — the change brought with it new objectives. In our case, to grow advertising-generated revenue by 10 percent year over year. As publisher, I immediately realized we would need new revenue streams to meet this goal.

Meanwhile, our advertisers had been clamoring for opportunities to network with other trade members and consumers. Many of these businesses depend on this interaction to develop the relationships that lead to future collaboration. Builders, for example, want to maintain strong ties with architects, who have powerful influence over homeowners during a project bidding process. Getting them in the same room was a valuable benefit to all. This got me thinking: What if *DNE* hosted an event that provided this kind of opportunity? And, in a fresh new way — elevated from the panel-oriented speaking events we had hosted in the past. If we could create an event that provided undeniable value to our partners, it would open up a completely





Clockwise from left: Design New England magazine, May/June 2016; Robert Allen Fabrics, dessert sponsor; 2015 Gropius House presenters; Design Showdown attendees. Background: The 2016 Showdown space-to-be-designed, Newbury Street, Boston.

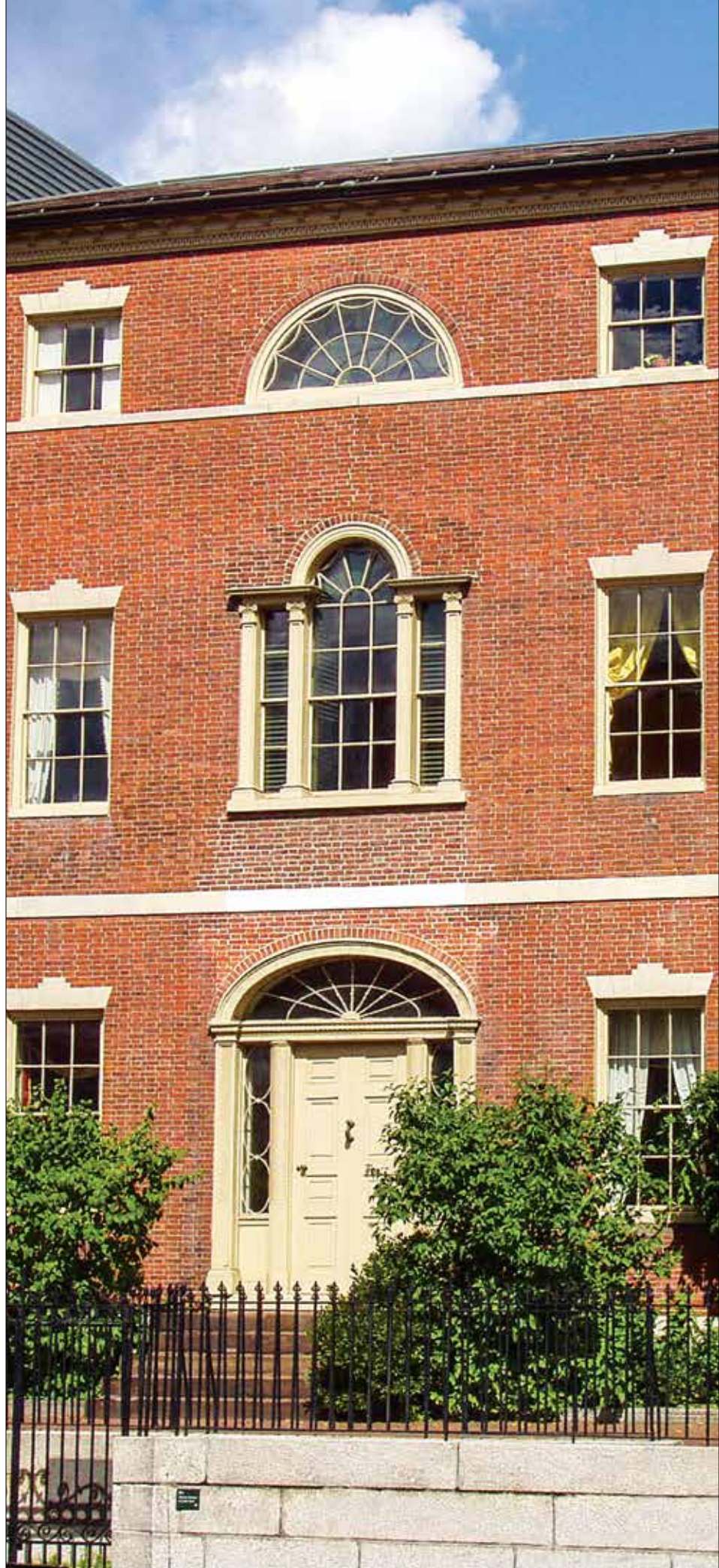
new revenue channel outside of our core product, the magazine.

STRIKING OUR OWN LIGHTNING

In November 2014, lightning struck. I was approached by Tony Fusco of Fusco & Four/Ventures, LLC, a local marketing agency planning the inaugural launch of Boston Design Week, a 10-day citywide design festival taking place the following spring. Tony asked us to be a media sponsor for the event — *DNE* would get exposure during the event week in exchange for giving Fusco & Four space in Boston Globe publications to promote it. But, here was an opportunity built around mini events. I didn't want to do simple, basic display advertising — I wanted to *be* one of the events. This was a prime opportunity to give our sponsors what they had been asking for.

We started with a basic premise: *DNE* would host an event wherein trade professionals could show off their skills to this design-loving audience. We saw two things intersecting: *revenue* (advertisers would sponsor the event) and *brand-building* (here was a chance for *DNE* to do what we do best: connect our audience with design trade professionals and inspire their design decisions.) Our first step was to find a venue. The First Harrison Gray Otis House, a property in Boston owned by local preservation organization, Historic New England, proved perfect.

Next, we needed an event concept that would be compelling for both participants and attendees. For that, we took inspiration from the venue itself. In learning about the property, it occurred to us that things haven't changed all that much since the house was built. That is, in 1796 there was a client (Harrison Gray Otis) with high standards and some very real expectations for the design of his home; and there was a prominent architect (Charles Bulfinch) who was eager to deliver for his client. Together, they created this enduring masterpiece. This kind of professional/client



design collaboration is at the root of our editorial focus, and we wanted to build our event around it. Specifically, we would approach professionals from our advertising base and give them a challenge: Redesign the property for a present-day Otis.

Three readily agreed: an architect, an interior designer, and a landscape architect. In exchange for paying *DNE* incremental advertising dollars for the opportunity to participate, these individuals would star as our feature presenters. They had a month to prepare their designs and presentations. Then, on the day of the event, attendees were greeted by a Historic New England docent and given a tour of the property, and then treated to a presentation in which our experts unveiled design proposals for a 2014 update of the very property on which we were standing. The room was packed, and people were howling with laughter and asking questions because we had chosen three presenters who were not only exceptional in their design visions but charismatic and funny in the demonstration of those visions.

As a revenue opportunity, the event was exceptionally successful. We brought in three advertisers (one new, one returning after a significant hiatus, and one that had merely dabbled with us in the past). Since the venue was free and Boston Design Week provided the bulk of the promotion, our expenses were minimal. The event was fun, and it was unique. We repeated a version of it a year later at the Gropius House in Lincoln, Massachusetts. We proved it's a formula that works. And, as such, it inspired our next iteration.

STRIKING LIGHTNING AGAIN

When something's working, you gotta run with it, right? And think about how you can evolve it. Our first two events were successful, but they

Clockwise from left: First Harrison Gray Otis House; Otis House dining room; Gropius House event attendees and goodie boxes.



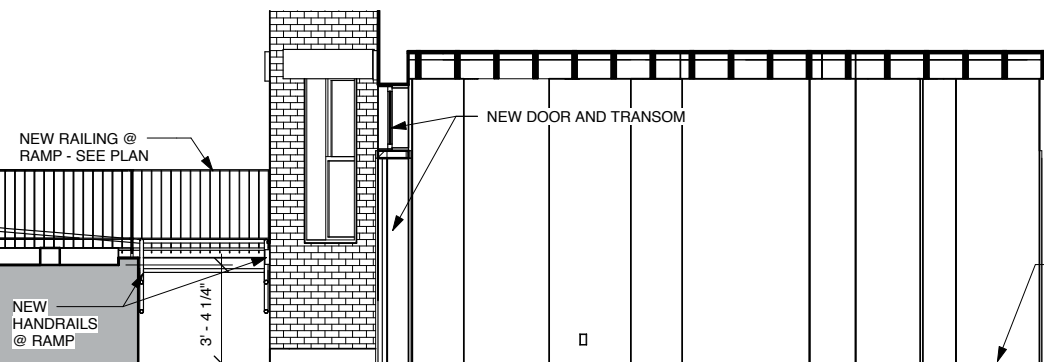
Courtesy of Historic New England



catered to our existing audience base of established professionals and design enthusiasts. In order to *really grow*, *DNE* has to expand this base. I wanted to create an event program that would engage a new audience group: the next generation of interior designers. College and university students in New England's premier interior design programs would be tomorrow's *DNE* readers and advertisers.

How do you engage a group of young designers? By doing something that's contemporary, fun, and challenging. A little mulling and a lot of networking later, the idea of the *DNE* Design Showdown was born. At the following Boston Design Week, in spring 2015, *DNE* would host a Shark Tank-like event wherein student designer finalists from schools around New England would present their designs for an actual space in Boston. They would do this in front of a rapt audience and panel of expert judges, not only presenting their projects but honing their skills of persuasion in the process. We would announce the results live after the presentations, adding fun and suspense and ensuring a crowd. The winners would then be profiled in a future issue of *DNE*.

The concept gained immediate traction. Fusco & Four ensured us a spot in the 2015 Boston Design Week. The Boston Design Center, *the* designer destination in New England, came on as a partner and agreed to provide not only one of their designer showrooms as our venue, but a property in Boston owned by their parent company as the space-to-be-designed. And, every New England college and university design program we contacted agreed to promote the competition to its students.



BOSTON



A Design Showdown ■



We immediately assembled an advisory board, which was essential. These professionals (two directors of college/university interior design programs, one current and one retired, and the president-elect of the American Society of Interior Design, New England Chapter) not only helped us spread the word to students but provided invaluable guidance on how to work with them, from structuring the assignment to defining the deliverables.

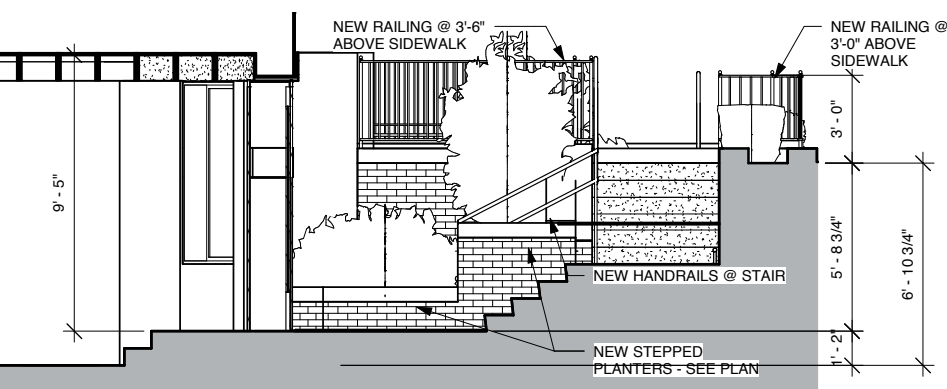
The judges panel included our advisors plus a representative from Jamestown real estate group, owner of the Boston Design Center; a principal at one of the most prominent architecture firms in the city; and a board member of the International Interior Design Association, all of whom lent credibility to the event with their participation.

BRANDING OUR LIGHTNING

I insisted on creating a brand and logo for the event separate from *DNE*. It was important to define this program as its own entity and as more substantial than a one-off. I was thinking of the years to come and how we could continue to build on Design Showdown the way *Vanity Fair* has done with New Establishment Summit and *Boston* magazine with Best of Boston, two highly successful event series.



Clockwise from bottom left: J.D. Staron, beverage sponsor; cutaway look at first-place design; DNE team with emcee; people's choice winner presenting; 2015 Design Showdown winners.



The project challenge we gave to the students: Design a live/work space for a duplex apartment on Boston's Newbury Street. And, identify and describe their fictional clients as a context for their design choices. For example, a 40-year-old active and outdoorsy single woman who wants her city dwelling to feel open. We provided the competitors with photographs, floor plans, and schematics of the space. From the more than 40 students who entered the first round, our judges selected eight finalists who were then invited to visit the Boston Design Center and "shop" for material samples to include on their presentation storyboards.

On the night of the event, with a large crowd and excitement in the air, each finalist pitched his or her detailed plan and fielded questions from our astute judges. After tallying the scores, we announced the winners — first place, runner-up, and people’s choice.

CASH FROM THE CLASH

There were many elements of Design Showdown that we needed to create, develop, scrap, refine, hide, and inflate during year one. It was the essence of fake it ‘til you make it. Not least of all was achieving sponsorship commitment. Here, the rubber met the road. Yes, you can name something and therefore it exists. You can call in some goodwill from people who believe in the importance of investing in the next generation. But, can you get good brands to put cold hard cash behind a year-one concept?

While *DNE* Editor Gail Ravgiala had been busy engaging the foremost local educational institutions for competitors, I was figuring out how we would position this to would-be investors and how we would price it. In the end, it wasn’t rocket science. The concept and the involvement of the Boston Design Center was enough to create a pull with sponsors. And smart marketers understand that if they’re going to survive for the long haul, they need to think not only about the clients they have today, but the clients they’ll need five years from now (aka today’s aspiring designers). With this event program, we’re giving businesses in this industry direct access to top students and, at the same time, broad exposure to a larger, fully engaged audience.



Photo by Joel Benjamin



SECOND ANNUAL STUDENT DESIGN CHALLENGE

DESIGN SHOWDOWN 2016 YOU BE THE JUDGE



APRIL 1 • 6PM
BOSTON DESIGN CENTER
ONE DESIGN CENTER PLACE • BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

FINALISTS IN OUR STUDENT DESIGN CONTEST PITCH THEIR IDEAS TO A PANEL OF DESIGN EXPERTS—AND YOU! BE PART OF THE COMPETITION AND VOTE FOR THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE AWARD, THEN CELEBRATE AT THE AFTER PARTY WITH DRINKS AND BITES AND OUR RADIOBDC DISC JOCKEY.

TICKETS \$15
STUDENTS ADMITTED FREE WITH SCHOOL ID

RSVP AT DESIGNNEWENGLAND.COM/SHOWDOWNEVENT

DESIGN BOSTON DESIGN CENTER BOSTON DESIGN WEEK



In the end, we signed on three sponsors for the inaugural event and did so with fun packages. Robert Allen Fabrics was our dessert sponsor and not only did we have mini cupcakes customized with their brand, but we dyed the frosting to represent the colors of their new spring line, samples of which were used as décor for the after-party. Kitchen showroom Venegas and Company had the exclusive right to include a logo on all promotion (others received only on-site logo display). J.D. Staron, maker of beautiful rugs, was our beverage sponsor, with the evening's signature drinks served in custom glasses engraved with their logo. When a partition was needed to block off the event space, we mounted and displayed two massive, stunning J.D. Staron rugs.

We would never have received financial commitments from two out of the three sponsors without the Design Showdown opportunity. These businesses simply don't spend money at the regional level for advertising, but they found the budget to support this program because they believed in it and their representatives at the local level advocated for it. It delivered a specific niche audience they don't reach any other way. We closed deals with two new business accounts and grew an existing account by 50 percent.

2016



Left: Student concept boards and 2016 Design Showdown finalists. This page: A promotional piece for Design Showdown 2016; 2016 people's choice winner; Robert Allen Fabrics, dessert sponsor; interior, Newbury Street retail space.



SHARPENING THE SWORD

We held our second annual Design Showdown in April 2016 — and, true to form, we kicked things up a notch. Some improvements were small: We started planning much earlier and added a kick-off promotional event. We freshened up our branding and added an admission charge to the event, where attendance nearly doubled.

Other changes were substantial. All of the schools we worked with in 2015 and two additional ones took the initiative to incorporate the Showdown competition into their formal curricula. This is a ringing endorsement of the value the program offers, and it led to a significant increase in the quality of submissions.

Another big win was having the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) join the program as an official partner. ASID is the oldest and perhaps most highly regarded professional association for interior designers

Clockwise from top: 2016 Design Showdown runner-up; garden entrance to the Newbury Street retail space students designed for in 2016; 2016 winner.





in the country. Their participation is a huge validation of our program. Tactically, it allows us to promote the competition to ASID's membership and enlist mentors for our finalists. Strategically, *DNE* gets exposure to the nation's most high-caliber interior designers. It's a big brand boost.

This event series is unique in our market. None of our competitors are involved in a program that reaches future designers while forming partnerships with educational institutions, trade organizations, and local businesses. The results are exceptional: We achieved a net positive revenue gain. We raised brand awareness with a previously untapped audience. We unlocked marketing budgets with sponsors who don't advertise in our regionally focused magazine. Our concept is being taught at the best design programs in New England. This event establishes *Design New England* as a brand that is innovative and endorsed by a respected and influential design community. And, it positions us to grow.

Design Showdown is successful because we approach it as a partnership — the same way we did in 2014 with the Otis House, our three-way endeavor with *DNE*, Boston Design Week, and Historic New England. By using that same collaborative approach with sponsors and advertisers, we develop the deepest and most effective relationships. Pair that with our unflinching desire to innovate and improve, and who knows how far this might take us.

Molly Campbell joined Design New England as an Account Executive working for founding publisher Steve Twombly and became publisher in 2013. She started her life in media in Los Angeles working in public relations and then in advertising sales for Hearst publications, ELLE DECOR and Metropolitan Home. Connect at tinyurl.com/linkedin-campbell.