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Retailing

Lighting design firm grows from 'indoor yard sale' to NYC showro



Image: Albany Business Review

Quittner owners Benjamin Davidson, left, and Pippa Biddle met as children at a summer camp in the Adirondacks.

LUKE NATHAN / ABR

By [Luke Nathan](#) – Reporter, Albany Business Review
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For many business owners, the phrase “slow growth” might summon feelings of anxiety or panic, a sense that things are not going well.

But husband-and-wife team Benjamin Davidson, 32, and Pippa Biddle, 31, owners of Quittner, a lighting and homewares design firm based in Germantown, embrace the term.

“We are really up close and personal with every single decision, which can make things take longer,” said Biddle. “It can make it a little bit agonizing. But it also means that

things don't slip through the cracks.”

The approach seems to be going well: The business has grown from a small purveyor of curated antiques into a multifaceted design firm represented by a New York City showroom, all while maintaining its ties to its community.

The couple founded the business - at the time focused on antiques and restoration of antiques - in 2018. The zoning district governing their rented home's neighborhood in Germantown, a small Columbia County town south of Hudson, allowed them to use half the building's space as a store.

It was a perfect, low-stakes way to test out their concept.

“It was really a glorified indoor yard sale just of stuff that we really liked,” Biddle said.

One early sign that they were onto something was when they realized an emissary of a larger antique dealer was buying their items for resale.

“So we learned quickly we were priced aggressively low and also that we had good taste, or at least taste that other people considered good,” said Biddle.

Quittner, then known as Quittner Antiques, was profitable from the get-go, according to the owners. One advantage was that the shop's initial inventory came from a storage unit in Kingston where Davidson was keeping an assemblage of furniture he'd amassed during a post-collegiate stint as a live-in caretaker of a historic home outside Philadelphia.

The restoration side of the business helped to broaden its offerings and customer base.

“Antiques aren't for everyone,” offered Biddle, “but everyone has the chair that was their grandmother's that they want to be able to keep using.”

The sudden onset of the Covid-19 pandemic made the prospect of operating a retail space in their home considerably less alluring. Biddle and Davidson closed it in October 2020, following what the former characterized as a “slow wind-down” amid the pandemic, though they maintained their restoration work and online store.

By that time the couple had gotten married and purchased a nearby property on state Route 9G with an old barn that could serve as a workshop. They decided to narrow the focus of the restoration side of their business to lighting fixtures, for which there was steady demand.

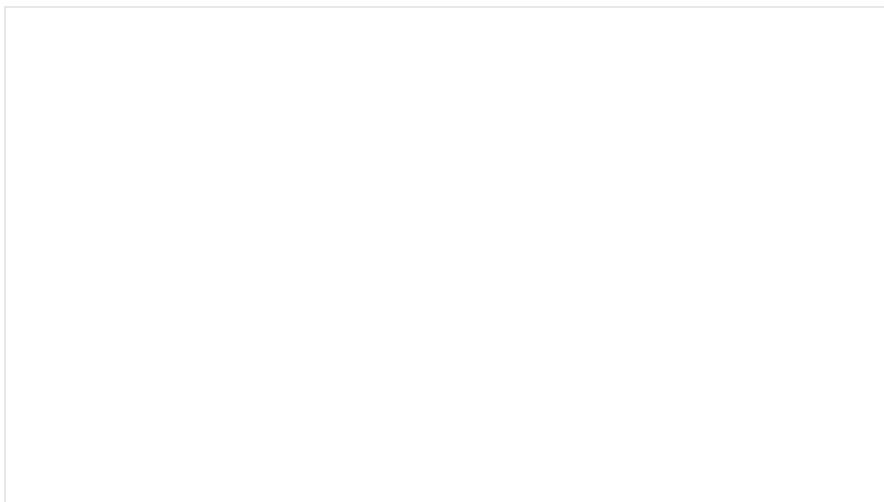
As the couple tells it, designing their own lighting - today a major part of the business - came about organically, as Davidson devised and fabricated fixtures for the barn, which they renovated themselves.

“And then, you know, a client would see it, and they'd be like, ‘Ooh, where'd you get that?’” Davidson said.

Adjacent to the barn property, fortuitously, is a small warehouse. As the couple continued their restoration work in the barn, an opportunity arose to assume the lease of a friend who had been using the warehouse. They took it; the second rendition of their retail store opened in December 2021.

“It's still a raw space,” said Biddle, adding that they had only recently replaced a solid

garage door with a more daylight-friendly, transparent one.



The Quittner retail warehouse is located at 4655 NY-9G in Germantown.

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The warehouse's shelves are filled with a variety of items old and new. Among the objects on display are Quittner's own designs, including pendant and flush-mount lights that feature porcelain made by ceramicist Aleah Stewart-Souris at her Greene County studio; antiques and restored lighting; tallow soap made by Biddle from animals raised at nearby farms; and a range of small-batch products from close to a dozen local makers.

Biddle said Quittner typically represents the makers on consignment, which she described as mutually advantageous, since it does not require the business to invest a large amount of money upfront but leads to the artisans receiving a bigger cut of sales than they would receive if wholesaling.

Sales of the brand's own lighting and their restoration of higher-end fixtures are what drive the business, Biddle said. The pair are represented by FAIR, a showroom in New York City, and their designs will appear in another showroom opening in Newburgh next year.

Though they recognize that not everyone will be able to afford their lighting fixtures - one of their porcelain pendants, for instance, costs \$1,100 - many of the antiques and artisan-made products have far more approachable prices, like a \$12.50 pair of natural beeswax candles or a \$22 set of handprinted notecards.

"We want to be somewhere that locals and community members can come into and find something for 30 bucks," Biddle said.

Over the next few years, the couple plans to continue expanding their collection of lighting designs and investing in the warehouse. They are in the process of bringing another person in to assist with lighting production, for which there is a backlog, according to Biddle.

The Columbia Economic Development Corporation board earlier this year voted to issue Quittner two loans totaling \$40,000 for "working capital and funding for inventory," according to meeting minutes.

“For us, it’s been [about] really controlling where the debt is in the business so that we can make decisions based on what we’re inspired by, and where our passion lies, and what we’re enthusiastic about, rather than having to make fast decisions to sort of make up for debt,” Biddle said.

As the business has grown, the couple has received conventional advice about scaling up but found it incompatible with their appreciation for craftsmanship and tradition.

“We always aim to make things such that in ten years, if the piece that we designed or the piece that we refurbished breaks or goes wrong, you can bring it in, and it can be fully repaired, fully restored, top to bottom,” Davidson said of the company’s original and restored lighting fixtures.

“And, because we want to be in this for the long haul,” he added, “for me, it always made sense.”