

SOPHISTICATED LIVING

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PROjECT. Interiors owner Aimee Wertepny in her new West Town studio space. (3-D metal sculpture by artist Eric Gushee)

SOULFUL SISTER

PROjECT. Interiors' Aimee Wertepny has already proved she's an interior designer worth her salt, but it's her heart that she hopes will one day be her legacy.

By Hilary Boyajian

Photography by Fig Media

Aimee Wertepny begins each new year by scribbling goals on a mirror in her bedroom with a Sharpie. Right now, the list reads “yoga,” “headstand” and “PROjECTION.” You see, Wertepny is a maker of plans—an altruistic, globe-trotting, trailblazing designer who makes everyone around her want to step up their lifestyle game. And not just because she's the founder of award-winning Chicago interior design firm PROjECT. Interiors, or because she has a hip new studio in West Town and a docuseries about to air on Amazon, but because she's authentically rich in love. Wertepny has found her balance by blending interior design with giving back, chronicling her philanthropic travels through collected treasures and the memories that lay behind them.

A hippie sophisticate who would rather be riding in a tuk-tuk than a black car, Wertepny is powered by soulful human connections—and has made seeking them out her life's work. “I believe a home should tell stories and reflect one's journey,” says Wertepny while settling into her new 6,000-square-foot

studio on Chicago Avenue. “If there are no stories, I want to help create some. It's wonderful when a client tells you that they have an heirloom rug, a collection of Kuba cloth from Africa or an antique table from Cuba, but if not, we've been known to upholster chairs in a family's old jeans and turn grandma's fur coat into pillows.”

It's this interior-as-biography mindset and a penchant for bending the rules that turns Wertepny on. A native of the Irving Park neighborhood, she knew by the age of 8 that design was her calling when she was caught rearranging her bedroom furniture and sponge-painting the walls. After majoring in commercial art at Lane Tech High School and interior design at Harrington College of Design, Wertepny spent seven years with Mary Cook Associates in Ravenswood before a client encouraged her to take a leap of faith and go out on her own. In 2005, she launched PROjECT.—Chicago's go-to for design-forward, globally inspired environments with heart and soul—and never looked back.



Horns, raw Peruvian alpaca, coral, feathers and Oaxacan pottery adorn the desk nook at Wertepny's home in Ukrainian Village.



The lounge at PROjECT Interiors. (Wall sculpture by artist Eric gushee, Lucite daybed designed by PROjECT., framed photo stand by Ralph Lauren.)

More than a decade later, Wertepny has grown PROjECT. from a one-woman show into what she calls a “tribe”—an all-female cast of seven creatives who share her organic-meets-glam aesthetic of clean lines layered with textural finds from around the world. Another required credential for tribe members is a commitment to living a purposeful life. Since 2004, when Wertepny began on her philanthropic path by mentoring a fourth grader through Tutoring Chicago, she has built schools with BuildOn in San Juan Yaro, Nicaragua, hand-delivered school supplies to the Amani Children’s Home at the base of Mount Kilimanjaro, and worked with Peace House Africa in Arusha, Tanzania, to help build a school for orphans. “Mentoring opened a revolving door where amazing people flow in, a spirit of generosity flows out, and life’s most important work gets done,” says Wertepny. “Something miraculous happens when you contribute. It creates purpose, presence and an

overwhelming sense of connection and gratification that sticks to your soul. It’s the good, gooey stuff.”

Part of the reason why Wertepny’s interiors are so sought after is because of how inspired she is by these human connections that she carries in her heart—and, quite literally, home from her travels in the form of Maasai necklaces, Oaxacan pottery and raw Peruvian alpaca throws, all of which find their way into her clients’ homes. Her own home, a modest, 650-square-foot studio apartment in the Ukrainian Village that she’s designed to function like a luxury hotel room, is a treasure trove of moments. “My relics are everything to me,” says Wertepny. “Every nook is a backdrop for an installation of mementos collected from across the globe. Beadwork created by women near Tarangire National Park in Tanzania, a series of framed black-and-white postcards from Austria, a feather I was

The previous owner of Wertepny's new studio space gifted her this antique safe. "It's my treasure chest! It's filled with remnants of the old skylight, broken glass blocks, scraps of wood, concrete and soil."

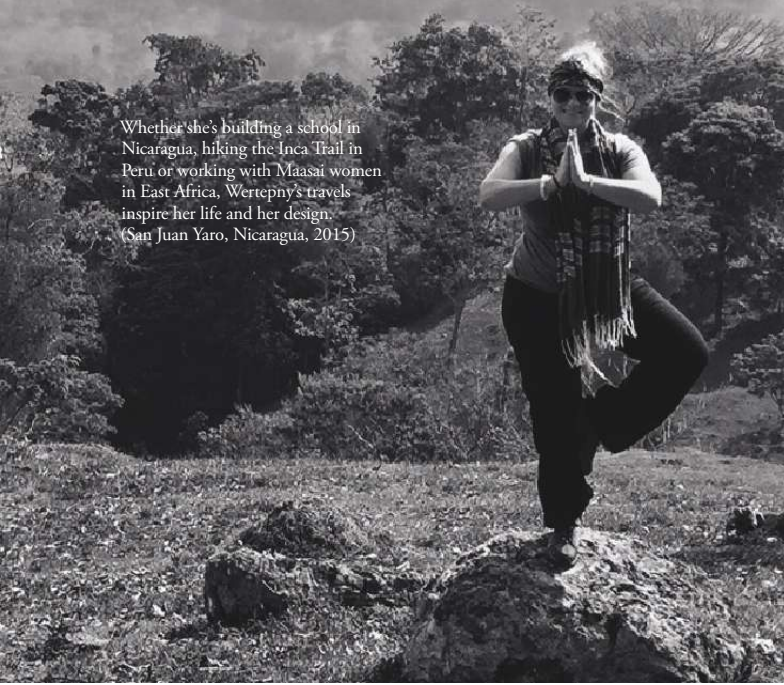


Dream catchers dangle from the ceiling in the studio. "I picked these up on the side of the road in Tulum," says Wertepny. "They were made by Mayan artisans and blessed by a shaman."

gifted by a Mayan shaman, street art from Cape Town... each piece is embedded with its own narrative."

Wertepny's ability to see beauty most of us would overlook is one of her greatest gifts. "Next time you go to the Randolph Street Market, go see my guy Darma," she says about her friend who's a vendor at the monthly West Loop market for antiques, art and global goods. "He has these larger than usual Cameroonian feather juju hats from West Africa used for dancing ceremonies. I hit him up all summer long for clients. It's one of my favorite ways to dress a wall. The hats are authentic, textural and whimsical." Combine her sixth sense for seeking out statement pieces with her eagle eye for scanning luxury brands for cool fixtures and furniture, and it's no surprise that PROJECT. was named Best in Design 2016 by *CS* magazine, made *Luxe Home's* Gold List 2015 and was deemed Best Interior Design Firm 2014 by *Chicago* magazine.

And as PROJECT. enters its second decade, it does so from a new home base—a massive space in West Town that previously housed the MasterCraft millwork and furniture factory for nearly 90 years. The previous owner was quite literally born and raised in the space, and had been running his family business there since he was 18 years old before deciding to retire. When it came time to sell, the stars aligned and Wertepny proved the perfect fit to take it over. "It just felt right," says Wertepny. "I could picture our tribe in there, design hustling. I wanted a place to hang our hats, grow the company and continue the legacy of creating there. I adore the concrete floors with all of its history—the unevenness, the years of sawdust stuck in the cracks. To a degree, I wanted to preserve the space the way it always was, clean-cut with a little grit. That's how we do it."



Whether she's building a school in Nicaragua, hiking the Inca Trail in Peru or working with Maasai women in East Africa, Wertepny's travels inspire her life and her design. (San Juan Yaro, Nicaragua, 2015)



Maasai teenagers in East Africa, 2016



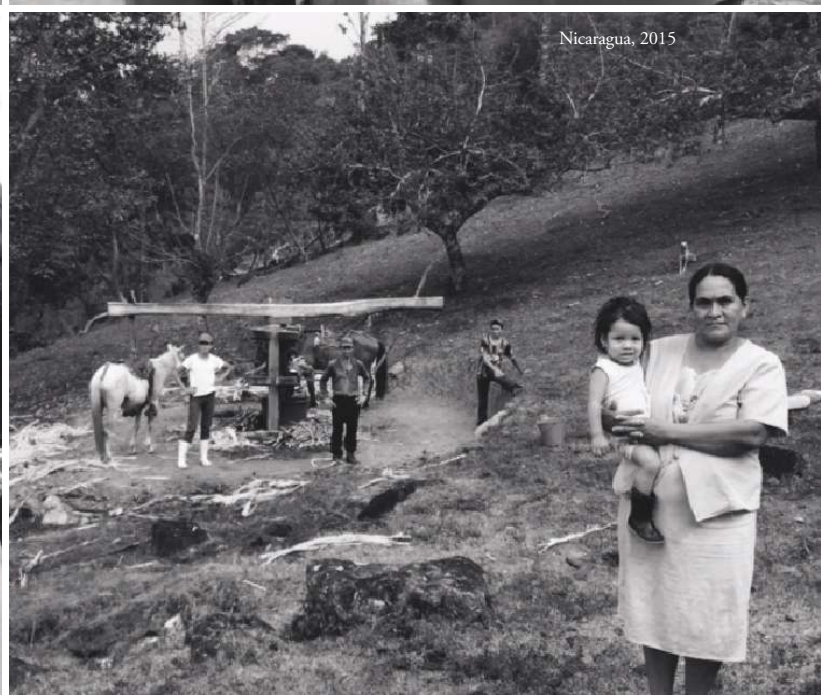
Peru, 2014



Tanzania, 2007



Building a school in San Juan Yaro with BuildOn, 2015



Nicaragua, 2015



Wertepny photographed beside the Trotwood trailer that she repurposed as a hangout space for the studio.

After just four months of rehabbing that concluded in November, including adding a 50-foot, energy-efficient Velux skylight shipped in from Denmark, Wertepny painted the entire space a crisp white and nicknamed it “BOWie” in honor of its beautiful bow-truss ceiling (and as a nod to the late music legend David Bowie, whom she adores). Complete with a lofted materials library, live magnolia tree, a pair of wicker chair swings, dangling oversize dream catchers, a hammock and a vintage 1950s Trotwood Camper she found on eBay and repurposed for meetings and coffee breaks, it’s the ultimate creative workshop. And because the building takes up two city lots, there’s ample space to warehouse home goods and store finds for clients. And, of course, Wertepny has big plans for the extra square footage (think networking events for Chicago’s design community, fundraising parties for the causes PROjECT. supports and the occasional dance-off or roller skating party—after all, there’s a disco ball over the conference room table).

As for 2017, PROjECT. is hitting the ground running. The tribe is in talks with L.A.-based Step Up—an organization that connects professional woman with girls from under-resourced

communities to help them become confident, career-driven young women—about creative ways to collaborate. And the Amazon docuseries *Prana Warriors* (a documentary that follows a group of people who were brought together to try to find their true purpose in life via travel, yoga, meditation, mindful living and service), in which Wertepny is a cast member, airs next month. We can also expect a PROjECT. lifestyle brand consisting of five signature essentials—shredded leather pillows, recycled rubber jujū wall hangings, embellished Lucite accent tables, aromatic candles and deconstructed jewelry—to launch later this year, with a major portion of proceeds going to charity. And expansion plans are definitely on the horizon. “PROjECT. needs to see the sun,” says Wertepny. “I dream of ‘PROjECTiON.’ as the concept for a satellite studio in Los Angeles. I see us working with the windows open and watching sunsets from clients’ homes in the hills. I think our vibe resonates more West Coast than Midwest, but we have deep roots here—this will always be home. It’s already scribbled on my mirror at home, so let’s see how the universe responds.” **sl**

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