



The Designer

# NOW YOU SEE IT, BUT MAYBE YOU DON'T

ApparenzA creates visible and invisible art

## All in a name

According to Thom O'Leary, "ApparenzA is a double-entendre: it can mean both 'the appearance' and 'the apparition' — what is there, and what is not there — in Italian. We design our furniture pieces to have a lot of negative space (the apparition) which adds, in turn, to their strong presence (the appearance)." Contact ApparenzA Design Studio at [www.ApparenzADesign.com](http://www.ApparenzADesign.com) or [studio@apparenzadesign.com](mailto:studio@apparenzadesign.com).

BY MARY SHUSTACK

**F**rank Spano, a furniture designer from Mahopac, is always open to new ideas. "Inspiration is everywhere," he says. "And when inspiration hits, you've got to run with it. It could be over a pot of tea at Temptation Tea House in Mount Kisco, and suddenly we're talking chairs."

Spano and his business partner, Thom O'Leary, grab that inspiration whenever it comes along, a frequent happening since they formed ApparenzA Design Studio in 2002.

It all began with a few sketches on napkins, a request of a colleague developing furniture for a local retailer.

Today, ApparenzA has some 100 pieces in production, many through that same local retailer-turned-international company, Polidor in Greenwich, Conn.

"They became a major company," O'Leary says.

"They became a major player," Spano adds.

In fact, it was through work done with Polidor that Spano and O'Leary received their biggest



honor to date, recognition last autumn during the prestigious High Point (N.C.) International Home Furnishings Show.

It was in 1995 that the board of directors of the American Society of Furniture Designers created the Pinnacle Design Achievement awards to promote "better design quality and encourage the recognition of furniture designers within the retail home furnishings industry."

Last October, when the Pinnacle award in the Occasional Storage category was announced,

Top, Frank Spano, left, and Thom O'Leary of ApparenzA Design Studio in the home of a Scarsdale client. Above, Robin Reich with the award-winning ApparenzA-designed Symphony Hall Chest, manufactured by Polidor.

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Frank Spano of ApparenZA Design Studio, Mahopac

Spano and O’Leary were named winners for their Symphony Hall Chest, manufactured by Polidor.

The piece, according to the judge’s comments, was honored as “an updated classic silhouette with transitional form and contemporary lines; an elegant storage solution.”

It was a moment that capped an incredible growth for the partnership, which has seen a longtime friendship grow into a thriving business.

“Thom is my son’s best friend,” says Spano. “I’ve known him since Scout days.”

O’Leary, who studied anthropology at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., started out by working with Spano on vacations.

The two may have very different backgrounds and frames of reference, but that’s what both say makes the partnership work.

“We have an interesting dichotomy of design bases,” says Spano, who says he’s a fan of “Hepplewhite and the classics.”

O’Leary, he says, favors the “stark and severe and simplistic, and together we play off each other’s strengths.”

Their creations reflect that very idea, as the pair take classic lines as starting points and give them new life through distinctive materials, veneers or hardware.

On this day, they are in the sprawling 1960s contemporary home of Jules and Robin Reich of Scarsdale. Spano, now together with O’Leary, have turned around many rooms for the Reich family after being referred by Danbury, Conn.-based architect Leigh Douglas Overland.

This has included interior design and decorating, as well as custom work.

“I think they really had a pulse on what we wanted,” Robin Reich says.



She appreciates the individual detail they bring to each project.

“If you go to other people’s homes they’ve done, they’re all different,” she adds. “They’re not cookie-cutter houses.”

Work here has included a home office and his-and-her dressing areas complete with a custom-designed, built-in closet.

Spano will draw on his years in in-

terior design for each new project.

“When it comes to rooms, it’s more Frank’s vision, and I tend to go to the details,” O’Leary says.

But Spano adds, “When it comes to furniture design, it’s truly collaborative.”

The pair will work on every last detail, from choosing the proper wood to

**This sitting area in the Reich home was decorated by Spano and O’Leary of ApparenZA Design Studio.**

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Top, Spano and O'Leary began designing furniture together in 2002 and continue to offer interior design services.

Below, the Tachi Server, one of the pieces ApparenzA has designed for Polidor.

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being sure the hardware is just right. "We have full control of design," says Spano. With their furniture contracts, that extends through product development.

Manufacturing is often done in Portugal, where Spano and O'Leary will travel to check on their designs.

A compliment from a craftsman is very meaningful.

"It feels good when someone who works at that level can appreciate what we do," says O'Leary.

Rui Pereira is the owner of Polidor, which handles the American distribution of the furniture made at the company's factory in the Portugal region of Portugal.

"We basically have been trying to develop a business in the U.S., and the decision was if we do it properly, we do it

through American designers," he says by phone.

The collaboration with ApparenzA has been fruitful, he says.

"We were impressed with the quality of their design ... we want to promote good design," Pereira says.

He realized from the start they shared a common vision, bringing cutting-edge design to the Portuguese reputation of "outstanding traditional craftsmanship."

"It's one of those things you always see from the beginning. You just know it. It was very easy to spot the obvious talent," Pereira says.

That flair for design is demonstrated by Spano and O'Leary as they move to the gallery that overlooks the living room of the Reich home in Scarsdale.

"This is the point where I designed the room from," says Spano, gazing out into the soaring space of the formal living room, decorated with many pieces from Baker and E.J. Audi.

Below, the award-winning Symphony hall chest stands, having arrived just the day before. Its elegant beauty is an ideal accent to the room.

The pieces are for a certain market. "Obviously this is a higher level of furniture," says Spano. The Symphony chest, for example, retails for just under \$4,000. "But there is a market, especially in Westchester."

And whether Spano and O'Leary are working on individual rooms, entire homes or specific furniture pieces, they feel a common thread.

"We are involved in design, whether that design is a room or a house," Spano says.

The company has also worked on creating sets for fashion shows, designing day-care centers. The two also write about design for trade publications.

They speak, though, of their furniture design with excitement, discussing the Tachi line for Polidor that was also unveiled at High Point in October.

It's inspired by the animal kingdom, a creation translated into being with sleek lines and exotic woods.

"It has a stance that makes it look like it's about to leap into action," says Spano.

As with their previous pieces for Polidor, there is a level of quality that Spano and O'Leary are pleased to be able to offer.

"Working with who we work with, they really can create heirloom-quality furniture," Spano says.

While the creative process is a long one, it is always worthwhile, as O'Leary says.

"It's great walking in a store or shop and seeing a piece of (our) furniture there." ■

