

JOURNEY MAN

SAN FRANCISCO
INTERIOR DESIGNER
BENJAMIN DHONG WENT
ON A SERENDIPITOUS TRIP
TO ITALY AND CAME HOME
WITH A NEW CALLING.
BY MIKHAEL ROMAIN

San Francisco's Benjamin Dhong was in the right place at the right time. In 2004, a group had gathered at an Andrea Palladio villa in Vicenza, Italy, to celebrate a friend's 40th birthday, and designer Martha Angus was one of the attendees. After chatting over the course of two weeks about their mutual love of design and art, Angus invited Dhong to apprentice once a week with her firm. One day quickly turned into a full week, and three months later he was dealing with clients directly. "I feel so fortunate to have met Martha when I did. Working for her was like taking a graduate course in design," says Dhong, who studied finance at UC Berkeley and later started a payroll service for Bay Area companies. "I always loved art but I didn't have a formalized knowledge of design, and I had zero experience going into this."

Despite his relative newness, Dhong's first project for Angus—the revamp of a San Francisco bachelor pad—made the pages of *7x7* magazine. "It was nerve-racking, but I learned so much on that one job," he says. "It confirmed how much I wanted to be a designer."

After two years at Angus' firm, Dhong opened his own company in 2006. Earlier this year, he made his official debut at the San Francisco Decorator Showcase house. For his showcase bathroom, Dhong mixed faux-bois wallpaper and a gilded mirror with Saarinen stools reupholstered in moss-green velvet. "It was the most exhilarating experience," says Dhong, who

Benjamin Dhong favors a mix of traditional and modern styles; for a Pacific Heights residence, he reupholstered a vintage chrome ottoman in a zebra-stripe fabric.

rose to the challenge of pulling the room together in less than two months. "It was organized chaos—part summer camp, part spirit week."

At the moment, Dhong is collaborating with another designer on a four-story Edwardian home for a family in San Francisco, all the while continuing his ad hoc design education. "It's not rocket science; I just read whatever I get my hands on," he says. "But what's most validating is the great client reactions. Once we've finished a project, that's when I know I'm in the right profession." ■

