

Ryan Korban takes the suburbs

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Few designers embody the downtown spirit better than **Ryan Korban**. Odd then, to find him perched on a silver sofa 20 miles east of Manhattan, in North Hills, Long Island. Outside, lawns were green, birds were chirping, and school districts were strong.



Ryan Korbam Courtesy of Korban

Korban was there to promote an apartment he had designed in conjunction with the Ritz-Carlton for a residency complex, built by development giant RXR. The complex, originally designed with empty nesters in mind, had found itself attracting younger families that were drawn to the idyll of suburban life, a relatively quick train to Manhattan, and the indulgence of valet parking at home. In an effort to snag more of them, Korban was hired to design a unit. Was Long Island getting a little more downtown, or was Korban getting a little more suburban? Yes and yes.

Korban is currently in the process of attempting a complicated metamorphosis: from a designer to a brand. Though his current business is creating spaces for residential and commercial clients, he hopes that his product lines will one day be his central concern. That transformation involves broadening some horizons. "Going from a service-based company to a product-based company, you need to branch out," he tells *Business of Home*. "With a brand like Ritz-Carlton, it felt like a great partnership to reach a different audience. There's a lot of property on Long Island, and there's a lot of wealthy people on Long Island who have taste and want to buy nice things."

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Ryan Korban

The transformation he's attempting is difficult, but Korban is well suited to it. The young designer began his career working in retail, creating stores for Balenciaga, Joseph Altuzarra and his Parsons classmate **Alexander Wang**. He's well-versed in the aesthetics and mechanics of branding. "I'm not one of those designers who's just thinking about layouts or fabric, I'm thinking about the vision," he says.

The very first step in executing that vision? Chopping his name in half—his lines are just "Korban." "I didn't want people to think they were buying from a person, but a brand," he says. A "less is more" approach also applies to the partnerships he has sought out. "The traditional way to do licensing is 'Ryan Korban for this, Ryan Korban for that,' you'd do bedding and tabletop and all that," he says. "I have been approached about those categories, but I've wanted to focus."

Korban currently has two licenses: lighting through Niermann Weeks, and his debut furniture collection through EJ Victor, which launched this spring at High Point Market. He recognizes licensing as a necessary arrangement to ensure a quality product, but he's hoping to make the process his own. "Even though licensing is old-fashioned in a sense, it was figuring out how to approach licensing in a modern way," says Korban. His soon-to-be-launched website, for example, isn't a gallery of all of his various license partners, but a more streamlined direct-to-consumer experience. The collection itself is also designed around a "licensing, but cooler" model.



Ryan Korban's unit in the Ritz-Carlton North Hills residence Courtesy of Ritz-Carlton

"With a lot of designer collections, the only thing that goes with them is more of them," says Korban. "It was very important to me to build a collection that was very item driven—you could buy one key piece from my collection and it would mix nicely with other stuff. The showrooms are sparse for that reason, I wanted people to be able to imagine their own stuff mixing in."

Many of these moves are aimed at consumers, not the trade. It's a tightrope walk that Korban acknowledges is difficult—he wants to keep his design business going and keep his relationships with other designers strong, but not lose sight of the long game. "We're operating a business in one way, and I'm trying to push it in the other way without also losing the business we have," he says. "I love the trade, I love all my friends in the trade, but I never wanted to sell just to the trade." Plus, as Korban points out, the trade itself is changing.

"Some of the processes and industry standards need to be updated," he says. "There's a lot more democracy and transparency in design now. My clients know what net pricing is, what designer discounts mean ... Just to appeal to the trade doesn't seem like the way of the future."