

How HGTV star Ali Budd built an all-women design studio with a presence across the globe

The Toronto-based interior designer has projects in Canada, the United States, Costa Rica and Antigua—and there are many more geographies to go

By [Vaishnavi Nayel Talawadkar](#)

Even as a little girl, Ali Budd always knew she was destined for design. “I’d spend countless hours with my dad drawing, hunting for furniture to rebuild or refinish, and turning various rooms into elaborate forts,” recalls the Toronto-based interior designer and founder of her eponymous design studio. “My parents were entrepreneurs, and I grew up at their ad agency in Toronto, surrounded by creative, talented, hardworking people—an experience to which I attribute so much of my love for design.” When it came time to decide a career path, she chose law, only to pull a professional volte-face shortly after by enrolling in an interior design programme instead.

After university, she went on to work in the interior design department of a large architectural firm where she learned the ropes of the building process and developed an appreciation for custom millwork and architectural detailing. “I decided my passion was residential design, and I moved on to one of the top boutique residential design firms in the city. It was through this experience that I learned how to manage my own projects and problem-solve in an extremely hands-on way. My incredible boss ultimately shaped my love for this business,” she continues. One thing led to another and before she knew it, she was ready to take on bigger and better things. A firm of her own was the natural next step. And it wasn’t long before she took it: Ali Budd Interiors (ABI) took form in the summer of 2010.

She may be based in Toronto, but Budd’s projects are evenly split across Canada and the United States. “We take the same approach no matter where we are working. I believe in a holistic approach to interior design, and this drives our process and keeps things moving in an organised way,” she avers. Of course, logistics are more challenging when she isn’t home, but in her mind, the pros outweigh the cons when it means the opportunity to work in different cities. In the United States, her projects are mainly concentrated across the East Coast and Miami—just one hour by flight from where she’s based, so fleet-footed day trips are par for the course.

Her latest project, the renovation of a circa-1907 home in Westchester County, New York, holds a mirror to her sensitive design ethos. When the homeowners purchased it, the 6,500-square-foot manse had great bones, but it was in desperate need of an overhaul. Budd retained most of the original architectural elements, including the panel moulding in the foyer.

What she couldn't retain, she replaced, including the staircase railings and dark oak floors. She also transformed the vibe of the living room by adding a custom stepped nero marquina fireplace, Art + Loom and Atelier Fevrier rugs, and a custom bouclé tête-à-tête sofa.

Closer home, one project that Budd holds dear is the gut renovation of a heritage home in Toronto's Rosedale neighbourhood. "The client requested a French-inspired interior that felt chic and special," the designer reflects. In a bid to augment the footprint, she had the basement partially dug out to fit a recreation room. She also specified a second-storey addition, which now houses the primary bedroom, ensuite bathroom and his-and-hers closets. In total, the home gained 1,000 square feet and a giant dose of personality.

Budd isn't afraid to straddle aesthetics. From contemporary to traditional to mid-century modern, her portfolio is diverse and her style versatile. This is none more evident than in the Dundas, Ontario home she renovated a few years ago. A mid-century modern build that held special significance for its owner, she was tasked with reviving the home while keeping all the best aspects of the original space. "The home backs onto a ravine and it was really important to the clients to showcase the beautiful nature surrounding the house," shares Budd, who had everything made to order, right down to the table and credenza in the dining room and the fixtures, finishes and shower enclosures in the bathroom.

Her inspirations are many, but amongst her idols are Kelly Wearstler and Kelly Behun. "Kelly Wearstler is an absolute icon. When you look at her spaces or furniture, you always know they're hers. Kelly Behun is also a current obsession. I love the way her studio is constantly pushing boundaries and introducing cool and quirky pieces into projects. I don't know, maybe I just have a thing for Kellys..." she jests.

For Budd, there's no saying what tomorrow holds. Her next project, for example, isn't a home at all, but a namesake television series for HGTV Canada that she just finished filming. "When we were in negotiations, I was adamant that I wanted it to be as authentic as possible. Every person in the show is a connection of mine and no client storyline was produced; it's all real," she reveals. "I'm a feminist and take issue with the way women are often depicted in lifestyle and reality TV: as vindictive, combative, shallow. My team and I couldn't be further from that and I'm so proud to show a group of women building one another up and having the best time together on this crazy ride." That said, the lead up to the premiere episode has her on tenterhooks. "Putting yourself out there is scary!"

There are lots of other firsts. She is designing her maiden project in Costa Rica and starting another in Antigua shortly. "My dream places to work in the future would be Paris, Tel Aviv and Dubai. I'm open and ready for anything," she declares. Today, ABI is a 10-member firm—with all women. The studio recently launched a tile line with Artistic Tile and there are plenty more projects in the pipeline. "My dad used to say if your staff are happy, your clients will be happy. I have found this to be extremely true. That, and the fact that having fun and being successful are not mutually exclusive. When you find something that allows you to do both, you know you've hit the jackpot."