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the week-end

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From: Julie Blum & Lachlan Blackley

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Re: empty rooms,  
floating books,  
pregnant curves  
& lots of shelving

# A Storage Story



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Flexicoomb  
display system.  
Playlounge,  
London  
(photograph by Bernt Ott)

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backlit, flexible  
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Magma,  
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Bonaparte  
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Bonaparte  
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Paris  
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French architect Julie Blum enjoys a more personal approach to creating for her clients. With her company Inside Out Systems based in London, she talks to Graphic about French stew, shelving and the process of creating the commercial and personal space.

**Where do you get your inspiration?** A good client is a good project. When I meet the person and I hear what they want to do, I start to get into their work and the connection happens. Usually the project itself triggers some issues or references. I start to look around me to see how a particular subject is treated. Then I start thinking how it could be improved. Sometimes the client thinks they know what they want but they actually give themselves limitations. You have to convince them that the project can be stretched to a much more interesting level. **When a client approaches you, what do you try and find out from them when creating ideas?** It's really through sitting down, talking and feeling the person, the way they react to their surroundings, physically and mentally, their dreams and what they like, what they don't like. It's finding the right balance, with a lot of exchanges of ideas, to get a clearer picture. **So you get to know them quite personally?** Yeah, you can go to a restaurant together and discuss what food they like or where they go on holidays. And you end up talking about life in general - you find out very well what their relationship to life actually is. I became an architect quite late so it's really the person behind, which is important. **How do you begin the process of designing after this?** It varies a little bit with the client and the project but I think there's a subtlety and it's my character to leave it like a good French stew. You know, let it boil for a while and the longer it sort of cooks the better it can get. So I'm not rushing onto the sketch. That drives the client mad sometimes. And then I have to do it. I'm also creating a bit of pressure on myself. I involve the client a lot. When I have a doubt or I'm not quite sure, I offer them two options and it works well because they feel they are part of the solution. **It's quite an intuitive process.** Yeah I think it is. It works differently with something like flats. That's about people's own understanding of the space and how they live with themselves. For commercial spaces, it's an understanding of what you can offer but it involves money and business, which is another level of communication in a way. I think my real checkpoint is that I'm kind of imagining myself as a customer and I'm entering their space. What do I want to see in front of me? What sort of things I like, I don't like and things like that. When you walk in the street you see a window display - you're standing outside, you see something. In very few seconds a lot of things are going to happen that are going to make you go inside - it's a point that you want to get right. **Do you feel that you have an established philosophy with your approach to your work?** Actually I thought I had, but the more I go the less I have. I think I was much more into theory and great ideas when I was at school but my approach is much more flexible to the point that I'm not sure that theory is relevant anymore. But having said that, when it came to finding a name for my company, Inside Out Systems was quite interesting. Without being a huge dogma, I think it was a way of describing a process, the way of working - how you go from what's inside your mind to the outside space.

**What was your approach to designing the Magma shops?** I collected books all my life and I was obsessed with storing books, their relation to the book shops, what I liked in a book shop environment etc. And we were not so happy with the way bookshops were working. The clients came with this idea of having the book covers facing out and we developed a design out of that idea. The interior walls, all the metal systems were actually inspired from cladding and a building envelope system, which I was working on at the time. And the leading theme was gravity - the weight of books opposed to the lightness of images. It was year 2000 and people would claim it was the end of the book - that books were going to die because they are heavy and would not resist the digital era. So how could we express them here without weight? We

also wanted to create a structure that was not resting on the floor. All the shelving structures, although they are different in the three shops, are revolving around the idea of lightness and weight, how your body pulls you toward the ground and the mind rebounds you to the air...inspiration. **This veered you off into the shelving and display systems that you've been developing.** Yeah, I realised that I was into simple shelving ideas. And I realised that it was a little bit of a building in a way - that you have to resist the weight of the books. So funnily enough shelving became storage. I was once talking to an architect and she told me something amazing that I keep thinking about all the time - that actually space is just a void - there's nothing. She said 'How do you create emptiness?' And the answer is 'you create storage'. So that's what I did. Once you've got the storage sorted out you have emptiness. **The business of the architect at the end of the day is just to create storage. And for the toy store Playlounge?** The storage of toys is very different from books because of their shape, their tri-dimensionality. We had a geometrical pattern that was quite interesting because we needed a lot of variety, while avoiding too much repetition. It was very intricate and very simple at the same time and very logical which I think was relevant for a toy and educative environment. The plexiglass shelving, called Plexicoomb, reminded me how shapes, even complex ones, can be really enjoyable and playful. The other thing with Playlounge was the experimentation with curves. Maybe because I was pregnant at the time. As the space is really small, we literally drew the curves around us once we knew what we wanted the space to be.

**You recently completed your mum's flat. How was that experience?** There's a saying in architecture 'Never work for your family'. So I did exactly the opposite with my mother and my father. And with my mother; she was a very easy client in a way, she's very open minded to those kind of things. But the difficulty was I didn't have deadlines and it took two years to complete. With this project I had the opportunity to really design around someone. At the beginning of the project I set up some rules. For example no right angles in the kitchen and a dressing room as elegant as the clothes they store. It took a long time to design something away from the standard solutions. I think it comes from the fact that I know her so well and I know little things about her - I came up with solutions that I would not suggest to someone I don't know so well. And it was quite nice to bring solutions that are not really traditional. Because I knew it would work for her. **Fleet Road Beauty Salon - How do you design a beauty parlour? What thinking goes behind it?** I really enjoyed working on this project. It was just after Magma and I liked this shift from the mental atmosphere of the bookshop to the physical/sensual tone of the beauty treatment salon. I took it very seriously and really tried to work on the substance of the skin, with its different layers of colour, softness, light etc. As people spend a lot of time lying on their back, we looked at how the ceiling could bring some quietness to the mind. We worked on the colour scheme with a painter who came up with brilliant solutions and very subtle proposals. We tried to work on the different gates, which lead from the mental to physical spaces. I still feel it is the kind of project I would like to investigate more. There is so much to say about it.

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