Chair APPARENT

As a teenager growing up in New York, Eric Villency had a skill few friends at his posh private school could boast: knowing how to upholster furniture. Taught by his grandfather Maurice Villency, whose eponymous company furnished the homes of millions, Eric might easily have inherited the family business and called it a comfortable day.

Instead, the 37-year-old has taken his creative inheritance and invested it in the Villency Design Group, a firm that, yes, designs furniture, but also designs everything from labels to entire buildings, working with companies to express their brands visually. He overhauled Delta Air Lines' Crown Lounges in Raleigh, N.C., and Miami; created the Club Level lounge at the New York Mets' stadium, Citi Field; redesigned the Club Lounge

Eric Villency, grandson of furniture magnate Maurice, makes his mark.
at The Ritz-Carlton, Palm Beach; and created SoulCycle’s new bright yellow, state-of-the-art indoor cycling bike.

“Anyone can draw a pretty picture,” he explains over iced tea at Manhattan’s Soho House. “But we fulfill a client’s needs from beginning to end.”

**A WELL-DESIGNED BUSINESS**

Villency says that his company has an overarching sensibility—think: hip—but that he’s flexible, thanks to being a businessman as well as an artist.

“Taste is very subjective, and at the end of the day sometimes clients are the ones making a decision,” he explains. “It’s not pure art. If you want something green, but they want it blue, the client has to be happy. Otherwise, it’s not a good project.”

His current passion project is a building on Long Island that once served as a warehouse for the family business and has been transformed into a sleek mall that is home to a dozen upscale companies, including SoulCycle and Organic Avenue. “I wanted to do something that had a Fred Segal sort of feel,” he says of the trendy L.A. department store. There is no credited architect: The company hires creative talent as needed, bringing everyone together as a cohesive whole under its name. What’s important, says Villency, is the design vision is totally ours.”

For all of his business acumen, Villency is still an artist at heart, “Most of the things I’ve learned are self-taught, and anything I like, I like to learn how to make,” he says. “I wear cuff links, so I learned how to make cuff links. I got really interested in denim, so I moved to Kentucky and learned how to make patterns. I’ve learned to blow glass; I’ve done it all,” he says—adding with a laugh, “At different levels of ability, obviously. But to me, one of the hallmarks of how we design and manufacture is we understand how things are made.”

**INFORMATION = INSPIRATION**

And like many artists, Villency knows his share of creative angst. The difference between agonizing and being successful, he says, is that he accepts his failings. “I fail every single day, I will work on something for six months and a client will say, ‘I don’t like it—what else do you have?’ My whole house is filled with stuff that didn’t work. America wasn’t ready for it, but I love it,” he says with a smile. “You do the best you can, but you can’t get discouraged. At the end of the day, no one knows what works and why all the time—not even doctors or bankers.”

Villency reads voraciously and takes pictures everywhere he goes when something catches his eye, whether it’s a well-designed menu or a striking detail of a building. “Travel is the most inspiring thing,” he says. “Because it’s easy to be in your bubble and that’s unhealthy as a designer, because everything starts looking the same. But even reading about what people are doing in Paris and Toyko can give you new ideas.”

He mentions an underwater installation piece by sculptor Jason deCaires Taylor off the shore of Cancun: “Life-size sculptures of an entire village in Mexico, submerged in water. There’s something very haunting about it, especially as it gets coral growth. It’s the very nature of impermanence, and a foil for life, which is always changing.”

Villency, who also loves to sculpt, doesn’t begrudge Taylor his creativity. “I never worry I’m going to run out of ideas!” he says. “Never, ever, ever. I actually feel like there are more ideas than there were 10 years ago, now with computers and the Web. It’s like surround-sound of stuff going on every second, and it’s like, ‘Damn, I have to get on my game!’”

And while he continues to offer clients ideas, there is one he’s keeping for himself: “I’d love to design an airplane,” he says. “Not the interior, but, like the airplane.” —Rebecca Ascher-Walsh