

## Creating calm within regulations

### Montclair-based designer Rachael Grochowski is figuring out how cannabis dispensaries should look and feel

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Brick-and-mortar retailers have a job to do: first, to attract customers and next, to display products in a manner so they sell and can be replaced with more. Whether jewelry, clothing, or cookware, that's the name of the game. Rinse and repeat. In that way, cannabis dispensaries are no different.

Factor in regulations, and the game shifts.



Grochowski

"There's a customization of fixtures when an industry is highly regulated. When you're designing retail fixtures, if you're doing a clothing store, you want to display it [in a way that a customer can touch it] or they can try it on. In cannabis, you want people to be able to see it but not necessarily touch it; and if they can touch it, not walk across the room with it," explained Montclair designer **Rachael Grochowski**, founder and principal of **RHG Architecture + Design**. "You have to design fixtures related to the goal, the experience, but keep in mind what's legally allowed." Grochowski has designed cannabis business spaces in Oregon, California and Oklahoma.

Regulations vary by state. Dispensary customers in some states can sniff the flower of different strains, but the flower must be contained in a jar that lets the scent out and is tethered to the counter. Grochowski has to be aware of both display and storage regulations when designing cannabis retail spaces. For the latter, **what sort of vault** is required? What other physical security measures are in place? "It's a complicated question of how one engages with the cannabis, the retailer, and the regulations," she said.

Grochowski is a Colorado native. In 2012, her home state became the first in the nation to take a stab at legal adult use cannabis, and though she'd been settled out east for six years by then, she watched the industry bloom and change.

It wasn't a connection from home but a Montclair Film Festival investor who brought her into the business. "It just happened to be that one of their investors really liked the work we'd done. They asked us to come up with concept. We've historically done a lot of experiential design [for] retail and restaurants, and we're thinking about it from that perspective," Grochowski said.



**Grochowski designed several Hashtoria dispensary locations in Oregon. — RHG ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN**

To her, dispensaries are akin to high-end jewelry stores, because the product is small. "Cannabis is not easy to display. Being able to display in a beautiful way that makes people want to buy it and ask questions ... then you have issue of what needs to be locked" is challenging.

In the six years since her first cannabis dispensary design gig, she's witnessed an evolution. Back then, budtenders and consumers would have one-on-one interactions. Now, Grochowski said "the industry is

homing in on this more 'access to everyone' perspective. There's a lot of conversations about smart technology, people ordering online, people wanting to go into the store but they feel uncomfortable asking questions because they don't know much about the industry ... so there's a lot of smart technology worked into the fixtures."

In the design process, she must consider practicality and personality. "You have to have a flow of the space that functions in a way that controls who is coming in. You have to document who's coming in, you have to make sure they're of age, and you have to have almost a holding pattern. They're coming in and have to have a piece of education, and whether they do that guided or by themselves is really a brand decision," she said. "You have to ask, 'how do you want your brand to be presented?' That tells you how the fixtures and the layout will relate to the user."



**How a cannabis dispensary is designed inside is part practicality, part personality. — RHG ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN**

"Initially, it was much more like a chemist. You'd go into the dispensary and you'd have a one-on-one conversation with a single salesperson, and then you'd pay that person. Is that the type of service that they want [to convey]? Or do they want to have a personal shop kind of service, where the salesperson, instead of being behind a counter, is walking through the store with you to provide education? The third method is through technology, which is becoming a common option," she said.

Grochowski has yet to design a dispensary in New Jersey, but she's designed plenty of wellness spaces, like spas and other hospitality outfits.

There's a real similarity there, she explained. It's about making a place people feel comfortable. Spas should be calming, and so should cannabis retailers.

"I associate [cannabis] with wellness and it's another part of who I am as an individual ... Going back to Colorado and seeing [the cannabis retail industry] grow into these luxury experiences, that's where I always wanted to take things. You're blending these two worlds, the idea of experience and product," Grochowski said.

With adult use spaces **in New Jersey's future**, so too is the opportunity to place make for its consumers. "It's becoming a lifestyle," she said. "As someone who's done a lot of retail and hospitality in the past, once you start looking at it from the lifestyle perspective, it's endless, and it becomes visionary, frankly," she said.