



[shop talk](#) | Feb 16, 2022 |

How big-box stores forced this New Orleans shop owner to pivot



By [Kaitlin Menza](#)

In *Business of Home*'s series [Shop Talk](#), we chat with owners of home furnishings stores across the country to hear about their hard-won lessons and challenges, big and small—to find out what they see for the future of small industry businesses like theirs.

This week, we spoke with **Nomita Joshi-Gupta**, a New Orleans-based interior designer who operates a design firm a floor above Spruce, her boutique wallpaper and fabric showroom. Located on the city's famed shopping avenue of Magazine Street, Spruce first opened in 2008 as a home goods store filled with "innovative objects" before pivoting to its current showroom-like format. Joshi-Gupta discussed that transition, battling corporate chains, and her view that wallpaper should be treated as a fine art.

#### **What was your professional background before the store?**

My education is in architecture, and I worked as an architect for many years at different firms. I did commercial, residential, hospitality. I also did urban planning after that with my master's degree. I worked at city hall at the local preservation society. It was definitely a variety of experiences that shaped me. And then we had Katrina in 2005. I had little kids at the time, and the downstairs of our home was flooded. That gave me a chance to think about my profession a little bit more, and the direction [I wanted to go].

#### **You opened not long after Katrina, right?**

Correct, in 2008. While I was renovating my house after Katrina, I felt like it was a chance. I thought, As horrible as everything is right now, let's do it in an innovative way. So I started to research vendors, whether it was for cabinetry or flooring or wall finishes, and I discovered this whole world of really innovative people. The internet was still young, so it was all through magazines—I had stacks and stacks of dog-eared magazines, and I was just like, This could turn into shop. I started to really enjoy shaping the interior environment. Spruce was a retail store in 2008 when it was first born.

#### **What was it like to invest in retail at a time when the city was piecing itself back together?**

I thought I was mad for doing that, but at the same time I felt my retail store was very different. It was more of a resource for innovative objects for the home, so even though it was retail, it was also education in this arena, which was very new for New Orleans.

Designers, you are working in a service industry, so your charging strategy should reflect your expertise, your experience, and the time and energy you put into your projects. On April 13<sup>th</sup>, join business consultant Sean Low for a [workshop](#) that will outline the different pricing structures relevant to interior designers, highlight the advantages and disadvantages of each, and share real-life scenarios so you can figure out which is right for your business.

#### **What is the design scene like there, or the home store scene like?**

When I started, it was still very traditional and rooted in antiques. If somebody wanted to insert a little bit of modern in their home, they would say, "I'll get some Lucite chairs"—that was the extent to which somebody was able to venture. My store was all this Scandinavian design and eco-friendly furniture, objects and lighting. That went on from 2008 to 2016, and it was retail. It was pre-West Elm [which opened its first store in New Orleans in 2014].



Joshi-Gupta decided to pivot to focus on wallpaper and textiles in 2015. Susan Poag Photography

**So the store transitioned to wallpaper or wallcoverings only in 2016. Can you tell me about that decision?**

It just felt a little futile. If Spruce had been in New York or Austin or San Francisco—or even, I don't know, Colorado—people would have really understood it. But somehow, people in New Orleans were just not getting it. They were still not in the mindset of, “Oh, sustainable!” I was a bit tired of [convincing] people and feeling that it was at a great expense to me. Also, it was Amazon, West Elm, the other big-box stores. I thought, I'm not going to be able to compete with all these people. This is too much.

Then I thought, I am going to focus on the one thing that I do best: interior design. My avenue into design was working with decorative surfaces, so I decided to focus on wallpaper and textiles. In 2015, I started to talk to unique boutique wallpaper designers, sample them and [tell] them how I was transitioning to wallpaper.

**What is the vibe of the space now? Does it look like a retail space, or a showroom?**

Everybody knew me as Spruce, a retail store that was sustainable, so I had to really drastically do [it] over. No, I cannot have people knocking at the door asking for a gift or a candle. We're no longer selling candles! We transitioned throughout 2016, and [after that] we only had samples on the floor. Then I did a drastic makeover. I said, “Anyone who walks in here has to feel like they are in the most amazing showroom, and you are going to get something extraordinary!” I created these large displays of wallpaper on the walls. We also have beautiful furniture and tables to lay out your wallpaper. You're coming to this place to find something beautiful for your home, because wallpaper is luxury—it's like artwork—so you have to feel that you are seeing something special and getting the best service. All of the design decisions were made for that purpose.

**Who is your typical customer? Is it mostly trade?**

Until very recently, 80 percent of our business was retail. After that, it was all by appointment, even before COVID. You had to come sit with me or my designers, and you'd spend a good hour and a half or two hours to make your selection. Then, during COVID, we got an opportunity to carry trade accounts such as Scalamantré and some of the larger manufacturers because there's another small trade showroom and they couldn't handle that volume. That gave me another push into the trade business, and now we're working with the trade pretty successfully.

**Do you have a favorite vendor, or a relationship you're really happy about?**

Oh, there's so many. When you're working with boutique vendors, they're all such great artists and people at heart, and we do our best to show their best side. Most recently I'm working with **Robert Malmberg**. He just joined the showroom, and I'm really excited about him.



Spruce highlights boutique and local textile brands in addition to larger companies. Susan Poag Photography

**What is a paper in the store right now that just delights you?**

It's funny because yesterday we were trying to select wallpaper for our displays, and I was just caught in a knot over it. Right now, I am loving textures. I'm loving Manuka from L.A.—she does these patterns that are beautiful and visually appealing. Because of my architecture background, I like everything geometric, so Jennifer Shorto is one of my absolute favorites.

**Is there a certain paper that is always flying out the door?**

There's a local designer, Palm Orleans. We have so many orders for her. Again, she's a wonderful designer and so easy to work with. She's on the game. Her design is New Orleans-inspired crossed with Lily Pulitzer, but in very neutral colors. It appeals to a New Orleans market and she really has that down. That has been very, very successful, and we are constantly ordering for that. It's interesting that we sell mostly really wild and colorful designs, and very rarely neutral designs.

**Is there advice you'd give yourself if you could go back to opening day?**

If you are a business owner, especially in the business of home, you need a very clear business plan. From 2008 to now, I feel like I have a Ph.D. in business. All the mistakes and learning—and sometimes the mistakes can be really costly, whether financially or emotionally. I wish I'd had more of a business plan. I thought I did, but I did not. The essence of it: I'd say, You really should focus on one thing and one thing only, and be an expert at that. I wish I had focused on that from the very beginning.

**I was wondering that—if you wish you'd pivoted sooner.**

I would not have landed at this juncture if I hadn't gone through all of that experience to understand my customer. Sometimes your idea, like sustainability, it's too early for your market. You have to gauge the temperature of your own market.

**What's another challenge specific to New Orleans?**

People know New Orleans all over the world, but it's a small market. It's very hands-on. The whole Instagram and social media thing, it just doesn't work here. We operate a little bit in the old-fashioned way to get to people, and I think people who come from other places are kind of taken aback: "Oh, I didn't know I had to actually call someone and have them over for coffee and discuss things." With launches and meetings, we make a huge effort to have that very intimate, one-on-one experience. That's very unique to New Orleans.



Spruce is located on New Orleans' famed Magazine Street Susan Poag Photography

**What's an everyday annoyance or challenge, and what's an existential one?**

An everyday challenge: I wish there were 48 hours in the day. There's just so much that we do serving our customers, keeping their appointments and then following up with their orders. It's non-stop. We have appointments back to back constantly. With my interior design work, to keep that going and pay attention to all my projects, I have to be ultra-organized. It's a lot, and I don't have time to do marketing and social media and all that—I cannot do it all, and we are only three people who manage everything. Existentially, at the core of my being, I'm an interior designer, and I don't want the message lost that I own only a wallpaper and fabric store. I always have that struggle. I'm an interior designer first, and I want that to be my identity at the very end of this journey.

**What's something you wish more customers understood about the business?**

I wish they understood that wallpaper and fabric are specialty decorative arts. The actual hanging of wallpaper is an art in itself. To get the finished product is a very long and beautiful process, and I wish people would not think of it as just a great selfie wall. Even for a designer to create wallpaper, the amount of technical knowledge that they have to have is immense. The design, the repeat, the way a pattern moves—there's so much thought that goes into that. You get like some people like, "Oh, I can just take my art and just duplicate it and make it into wallpaper." No. You have to think about scale, about repeat and rolls and printing and substrates. There's just so much.

**What do you feel is the future of small businesses like yours? You've already mentioned how you had to adapt because of big box retail, but what do you think is the future of other independent stores?**

The pressure of big-box stores and the internet is so great. It's literally bearing upon us every day. I hope that people [with stores like mine] really start to think of their businesses as showrooms rather than retail outlets. I can see that even in some of the big-box stores, they are moving towards a showroom business model where you have items on the floor that you can actually see and touch, and then you order it. I feel that's the only way small businesses can really survive—by giving high-quality service, because you cannot get that high-quality service online. It worked for me.

**What's a great day at Spruce? What's your favorite kind of day?**

I just love personal interactions, whether it's with my design customers or my wallpaper customers. A wonderful day is when I have a design client, I present a project, and I push them to the boundaries of their comfort zone, and they are just delighted by what's shown to them. It's so amazing when they can understand my vision for

them. Actually, I had that day yesterday! It's not a day when we make the biggest sale. It's the day when I can share my design vision with someone. It's really, really satisfying.

Homepage photo: Nomita Joshi-Gupta | Susan Poag Photography

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