

# On convincing others to take a risk



Gallerist and author Jean Lin discusses networking genuinely, spending all her money to start her business, and educating about the value of design.

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As told to Laura Feinstein, 2396 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Design](#), [Business](#), [Money](#), [Collaboration](#), [Beginnings](#).

## **How did you start Colony?**

Colony was founded out of the destruction of Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The New York City community was struggling in the wake of the storm and many makers and designers were affected. There was a sense that everyone wanted to do something to help, but nobody knew what. My friend and I organized a charity exhibit called Reclaim NYC and invited designers to contribute to work made from debris from the storm. Over the short course of a month, we were overwhelmed by the design community's contributions. The pace that they worked at shows how energized everyone was.

Before that, I was a writer, an editor, and a fashion designer. This project was my first time in a curatorial/organizer role. It sparked something. I stumbled upon this amazing outlet of creativity that was based on community and [it was] just energizing and purposeful. I thought of Colony between the first and second Reclaim shows. I realized all these creatives had the same challenges, and there was an opportunity to face those challenges together.

## **There must have been many challenges to take on.**

One of the biggest was margins with showrooms and galleries. A traditional showroom charges 40 to 60% commission. For the independent maker, that's just not viable. People have made it work, but it's not ideal. Colony operates in the spirit of a cooperative. We charge a monthly fee, like an inexpensive rent, and a much lower commission. The idea is that designers can make sales and grow, rather than chasing margins. Even if they sell at volume in the traditional model, they still have a lot of trouble making money because of those very tight margins.

The other challenge was real estate and building an actual physical brick-and-mortar space in Manhattan. I was adamant about that. We were at a tipping point, when it felt like design was all happening online and you didn't need to leave your house. You could learn about it from Instagram or other platforms. But I felt this business had to be experiential. But it was scary because I knew nothing about commercial real estate.

## **Rent in New York City is truly terrifying.**

I got lucky. The space I found, on Canal Street, was owned by a Chinese family. Usually, you need financial documentation if you're a new business, but they leased it to me and took a chance. They wanted me to succeed. They cheered when I signed and gave them my security deposit. It felt like kinship. It was the right space for the business and the only space I could imagine those first 10 years ever happening. It was idealistic, and we turned it into a legitimate business somewhere in there. When I tell the story, I note it started as an

"idealistic business..." with an ellipsis, but it truly began with community focus and was mission-driven, and has since turned into my livelihood.

**New York has become so expensive, with many event spaces underwritten by corporations or "mystery money." You are a regular person who came from a normal background. Could Colony be created in 2025?**

I'm not wealthy, but I'm certainly more fortunate than many. At the end of the day, I am just "normal." I used to say, "Normal people like me can't make a significant impact without huge risks." And this was a huge personal risk. I remember signing my lease for the first phase; I had to guarantee it personally, which meant if the business didn't work, I would be on the hook. Not everyone is willing to take that kind of risk. Can what we built happen now? Absolutely. But it would take more. It's a question of being comfortable with risk.

**You just went for it.**

I had worked for a long time and saved money... I used my own money, but it was *all* of my money. I had worked a regular job and made a good salary for at least two or three years before starting Colony. I wasn't a big spender, and just saved. Then I spent it all in one go. It was wild. And I still needed to borrow and convince my brother to front that little extra.

**Some might look at your career and assume you've always been in cruise control. Was there a moment when you realized it was actually working out?**

I started a consultancy about a year and a half in [to starting Colony], and that work gave me and the co-op a safety net. We do interior design work, marketing and art direction, and content creation. There was a point, maybe four or five years in, when sales were doing well. We were hitting our stride with the gallery, and the consultancy was also growing. The margins on the gallery are tiny because of the model, but on the consultancy side, the margins are much better. I realized I had a business where I couldn't have one without the other. But the two businesses can run side-by-side and protect each other in a diversified stream of revenue.

The reality is that everything is tricky, even with financial backing—especially if you're trying to do something that's never been done. That's just the nature of doing something new. There's the hard work that is universal to anyone who's trying to put something out into the world. But the risk is particularly relevant when it's personal, or you don't have as wide a safety net as you would like.

**It can be intimidating to go it alone.**

I wasn't the only one taking risks. All the designers were on board with the idea—just an idea, that wasn't proven at all. Our model was a collective risk, but it paid off. We closed our eyes and jumped. Someone once said that perceived risk is often greater than perceived success. This keeps people from taking significant risks because they perceive any risk as massive. That resonated with me because it puts us in two categories: risk-averse or risk-tolerant. I knew what my upside of the risk was: I wanted to write my own script for my life, and to care about where I was working every day. I feel lucky that this has manifested into reality. It was never about getting super rich. But the upside is a life I feel passionate about.

**How did you convince designers to do this together?**

I saw Colony as filling a hole. There weren't a lot of platforms—if any—solely dedicated to the independent American maker or designer. There were even fewer that were brick and mortar. There were some e-commerce options, but brick-and-mortar is an essential part of what we do. To experience the work in person is something special. It was a lot of going far with ambition and a lot of dreaming. The creators realized this was a big risk. But I pushed back and said, "Imagine what we can do."

I started with 12 designers, over long conversations, mostly in person. [Meg Callahan](#), who does quilts—I was a fan and wanted her to be part of Colony. She lived in Providence, and I asked to meet for coffee. She was leaving for

a one-way road trip on Monday, and I drove there on Sunday. I met her, discussed Colony, and she said, "Okay, let's do it!" I had a lot of those types of conversations, meeting wherever the person or studio was, sharing who I was and showing them my passion around the project. Some dropped off, and some weren't sure and joined later, but it was a lot of conversations.

**So much of building anything involves just reaching out and asking, "Hey, want to grab coffee?"**

[There is] a big pitfall people make when they're in their "networking era." Out of urgency, they are feeling like, "I need to network, I need to go to this event, I need to get this many business cards or this many connections!" There's nothing wrong with that, but from experience, the most fruitful relationships are genuine. When you go out with an open mind and find other people who are open as well. Then, later, you're in this great community where people are super generous and get what you're doing, and open to helping out.

**How could someone get more involved with what you're doing?**

We have events on a semi-regular basis. Come chat with anyone here, the team or myself. Feel out the vibe of the space. Get to know us online and in-person. We have our [residency program](#). We do [interior design](#). There's a lot of opportunity to work with makers and furniture designers. We can't fit everyone into our space. Often, if there's work we love that we can't necessarily represent, we try to work them into our interior projects. That's another way we build community within our little pocket of the industry.

**Can you discuss your residency?**

Our residency program is an incubator that runs for eight months, depending on scheduling and shows. The curriculum is focused on launching nascent designers' first collections and bringing their studios to the market. We work closely on identity development and how they represent themselves. We subsidize studio space, and expenses around starting their collection. They work part-time at Colony and see the ins and outs of what we do. Then, it culminates in a show where they launch. After that, they are represented by Colony for two years, with the collection exclusive to Colony. It's a holistic mentorship.

**You have met so many creators through your life and work. How did you choose who (and what) made it into your book, [What We Keep: Advice from Artists and Designers on Living with the Things You Love](#)?**

I always secretly wanted to write books, but the opportunity presented itself three years ago. It came with a little bit of a caveat, which was that my editor had the idea of a book about collections. My proposal was my version of what a book about collections could be and the reality of what that was; it was actually about people. My whole ethos is that the connection between space and objects is made whole by the people who use them.

When I started thinking about who would be in [the book], I cast a wide net, which turned out to be quite broad and like a puzzle. First, you ask people if they're collectors, but many of the most interesting collectors don't think of themselves that way. So the puzzle was finding engaging creative professionals with beautiful homes or spaces that felt photographable but also had an approach to objects that was soulful, interesting, and worth retelling. The book found itself in my network of people. The people profiled each have an interesting story, and the objects in their lives support those stories. Then there was a lot of hard thinking about organization. I used the five traditional Chinese elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water.

**So it became a very personal book.**

I was passionate about including studio visits. Each section has several, where you get to see how these items are made and who makes them. If you understand the creators who make the work, then you know the actual value of the work. We would shoot three projects in one day. I didn't want a book of existing photography; I wanted everything fresh with fresh eyes.

At first, I felt it should have a through line, or that each section should speak to the other. But my editor

felt, "This is not how people read these books. They will open a random page." And I was like, "Thank god." Once I realized that, I wrote each section individually and it went a lot faster and less painfully. I could treat each profile or essay as a standalone piece. My editor is good at bringing me down to earth. My writing can be a little bit dreamy and esoteric. But I didn't want the book to be alienating. She made sure the end product felt artful and commercial, which I'm grateful for.

**Would you ever do it again?**

Colony just hit its 10th anniversary and I realized that the version of me now was so different from the version of me that started Colony. And the version of me now looking into the future is also different... But I still feel there's this sweet spot where design can serve the greater good, and that is around education and the space that we inhabit. That work not only affects our lives but also shapes what we consume and what we keep.

Design is a big part of our lives, and there is a way to live in that world without breaking the bank. If you look at a design object as something you use forever rather than use and throw away, that investment means something. I believe in education about the value of things. This book was my best attempt at reaching that audience in a way that meets them where they are. I would absolutely do it again.

**What would you say to someone who has an idea but is scared to jump?**

If you have an idea, it's all about being present. When you're at your job and daydreaming, you're not serving your job or your daydream because you're in both worlds. It is about making time for the dream in your life every day. Making space for it to germinate and become the real idea. Daydreaming about not being at that job is also not serving you. There are so many things to be done; try not to worry about the other things you have to do while in the middle of something. Be present. So don't necessarily quit that job, but permit yourself to leave it when it's time. Carve out space in your schedule to plan and dream for that thing, because that is when the actionable ideas are going to come.

**Jean Lin recommends:**

[Bliss Montage](#) by Ling Ma

Ceramicist [Stephanie H Shih](#)

[Stay True](#) by Hua Hsu

Designer [Peter Do](#)

[Glenstone](#), an art museum in Potomac, Maryland

Name

Jean Lin

Vocation

gallerist, author

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