To Design is Human

ERAN CHEN
Designer, Architect, and Creative Director
Office for Design & Architecture (ODA)

Israeli-born Eran Chen is one of the founders and the creative director of ODA, a prominent architecture firm based in New York City. ODA has gained attention for innovative projects that include everything from historic renovation to luxury hotels, from private residences to furniture collections. The firm's international work includes the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem and The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo, Norway.

In addition to his work at ODA, Chen is a guest professor at Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Israel. His work has been recognized in publications including *The New York Times, Architectural Record, The Architect's Newspaper, Concept Architecture Magazine*, and others.

Born designer

I was always intrigued by the three-dimensional environments that surround us and tried to document them one way or another. My mom always tells the story of when I was five years old and I sat down and drew perspective views of our living room. She still has the drawings to prove it.

Later in life I had different ideas; I thought of being a physician and a surgeon, many things. In Israel, after high school you go into the army for a few years, and it gives you time to decide what works for you. In my twenties, I came back to architecture and thought this is really for me.

Still standing

Every architect has their first project and their first client who they'll love forever. When I was in my third year of architecture school in Jerusalem, friends of mine asked me to design their home. I was a pretty ambitious student and I took on that mission. Of course we had to involve an engineer to sign off on the drawings; and the client's husband was a contractor, so he was confident enough that he could read my working drawings—which were far from perfect. But I designed their home some 20 years ago, and they still live in it, so I guess it was successful.

A universal language

I love the fact that our team [at ODA] is international. It wasn't necessarily intentional, but it came about this way and we love it. I think New York is one of the few places in the world where you can achieve full collaboration in an environment that supports an international team. Different people bring different backgrounds and cultures, and the emotional influence they have on the architecture creates international connections. It has nothing to do with style or country, social or economic situations. I think architects notice this about our work, and it attracts them to our firm.

Inheritance and renewal

I don't think you ever build entirely from scratch. Whatever you're building, as an architect, you build within a context that preexists. The question is how much exists within the parameters of the project. But even if you build something from scratch, you inherit everything that surrounds it.
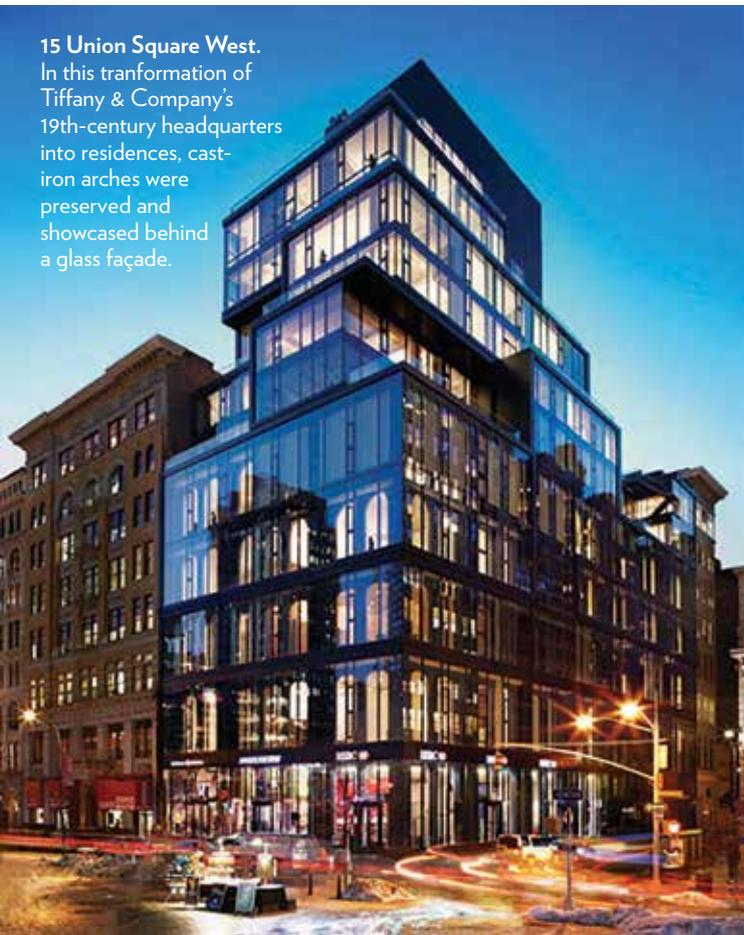
The most successful cities in the world are those embracing the history of their architecture but still creating renewable frameworks all the time. There are a few cities I recently fell in love with. Barcelona is a great, vibrant city, mostly because of that balance of history and renewal. Tel Aviv, where I come from, is very similar. It has the biggest collection of Bauhaus buildings, yet it's not a city that is frozen in time. It's ever-changing and dynamic. That really influences the type of people it attracts, the type of people who gravitate toward these cities.

It's not about the buildings. It's about an environment, the people who occupy these buildings and their interactions. Barcelona really struck me as the kind of place you just want to be—you want to sit right down on the street and have a sangria and take it all in. Whether you walk through the buildings of Gaudi or go to the beach, there's a sense of liveliness. Combined with the public spaces, the people, the food, the whole culture, that makes it a very successful city.

Creating a shared vision

Architecture is about engaging an idea and making it happen through the process of convincing large groups of interested parties that your vision is the right

15 Union Square West. In this tranformation of Tiffany & Company's 19th-century headquarters into residences, cast-iron arches were preserved and showcased behind a glass façade.

shapes, movement, and interaction on a personal level between people and things.

But I can't design in a void. If there are no parameters that define what a design must address or the problem it must solve, then there isn't much I can do.

Human design

I prefer to draw on paper. The general consensus is that computers have totally changed and revolutionized the world of architecture, but I think they are just another tool architects use to communicate purpose and achieve goals. A lot of people take this tool and make it the purpose, but they should understand that these capabilities or automations are only partly contributing toward the goal—which is to enrich people's lives with architecture.

We use them in the office: we present ideas; we do computerized modeling; we do everything via computer ... eventually. But we have to be very careful that it doesn't take over and that some of each of us is in the work instead.

In addition to designing and renovating buildings, ODA has also designed furniture, including a line of children's furniture.

one. To sit down and do a sketch of something is one thing, but it's a small part of the world of architecture. In order to build, you need clients, investors, engineers—numerous teams collaborating toward a common goal.

The most challenging thing is to really believe in what you're doing and the story that you're telling, and then convincing the rest of the team that this is the right thing to do.

Creative problem solving

Design is design. I could design a piece of furniture or do urban planning for a city. In a way they're really similar for me. They are both about problems and solutions. When it comes to furniture, the DNA—the chain of information and the elements that influence the design—is less extensive than for a building. This allows me to experiment with ideas of materiality:

The essential quality

To become a successful architect, an individual must be passionate not only about architecture but also about solving problems in a creative way. Architecture is about looking beyond basic design to understanding the dynamics between people, the interrelationships. It's not just about creating objects; it's about creating for people. **i**