

Thom Mayne

Architecture is a discipline where it's impossible to escape values

Profession: Artist-architect, I guess. I draw. I survived for many years selling drawings, objects, and furniture. I have a very active practice right now in planning and design, and I have a very, very broad practice in architecture. So I'm an architect defined in the broadest sense of the word.

Education: Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Southern California, Master of Architecture from Harvard GSD.

Last book read: *Life Evolving: Molecules, Mind, and Meaning* by Christian de Duve, the Nobel cellular biologist. Really fascinating piece of work. And I'm reading *The Outsider* by Colin Wil-

son: a real classic. Actually, I'm writing an article for the AIA's 150th anniversary on the rebel—architect as rebel—and I went back to *The Outsider*.

Hobby: I don't consider reading a hobby, but I read the *New York Times* cover-to-cover every day and the *L.A. Times* every day as a habit, every morning.

Source of inspiration: My life and the people around me, which includes everything I listen to, look at, read—literally everything that goes through my brain. It's a gestalt. It's accretional. It grows over time of the totality of life, and finally that translates into some sort of wisdom as you get older.

Greatest achievement: Without a doubt, my greatest achievement is my children. That's an easy one. My three boys, that's in my personal life. In my business life, I think it's been transforming a smaller, highly design-oriented firm that's interested in experimentation and innovation and segueing that into large public projects. We completed about a billion dollars worth of work and all of them are large scale. I've been able to somehow maintain the spirit of my practice in the sense of its experimental and innovative characteristics. I'm definitely proud of that.

Greatest challenge: Convincing my clients or the world in general of the need for staying relevant: the necessity of innovation and experimentation and exploration and the danger of complacency. I see the world we live in—and especially this country—at this moment in time as immensely, destructively conservative and part of it is naiveté philosophically. The most difficult part of my work is moving past those boundaries of the status quo and convincing people of the necessity of [innovating] if we're going to evolve as a culture and maintain some sort of relevancy in scientific, or ecological, or biological terms. It's funny, innovation in this country is seen very much as risk and I don't see that at all. It's quite the opposite. It's finally quite pragmatic. If you don't evolve, you perish.

Practice tip: Literally the success of the firm right now is based on our ability to convince people of our ambitions and the vitality and the reality of those ambitions. It's a conservative profession. I think it's suffering from its lack of ability to have a certain kind of courage

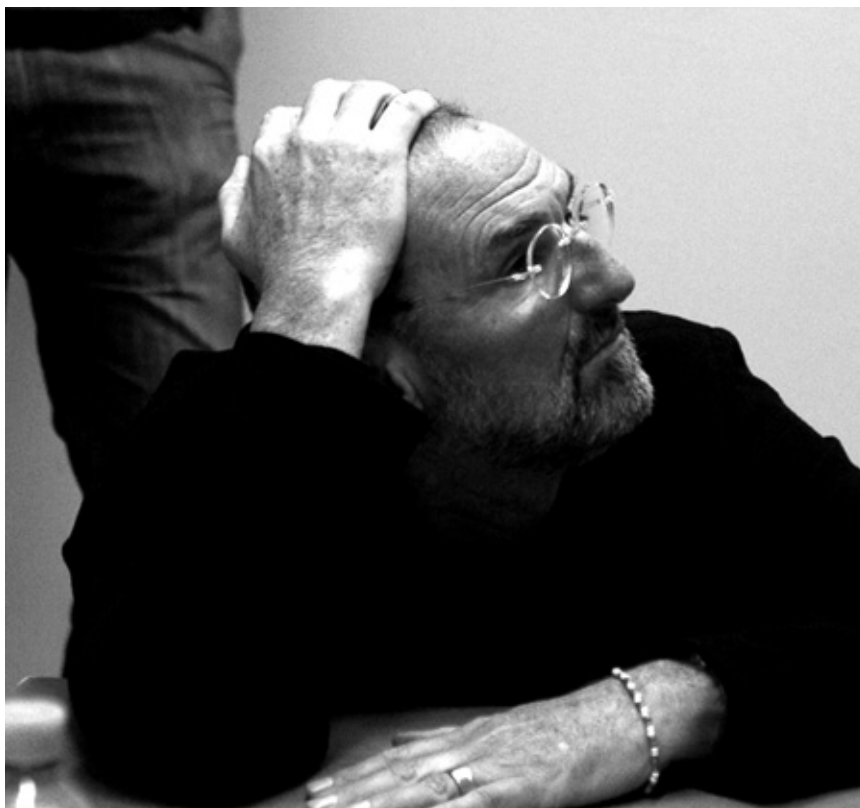


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DOER'S PROFILE

of its convictions, to actually resist a lot of the impulses of the world as it exists at this moment. I understand the problems of that passivity because it's a profession that produces services and it's in some way dependent on that society, but they do have more choices than they think and they don't tend to represent those choices in a very powerful way. They succumb to economic survival—I think it's probably that simple. I'd encourage our profession to be a little bit more courageous, to find their convictions and to really fight for them.

Teaching philosophy: I've taught for 30 years. The key thing is that architecture is a discipline where it's impossible to escape values. It's radically value-laden. I think it's possible that you can become a designer—an architect—and see it as somewhat autonomous and not as a political act, which is just totally incredibly naïve. I try to make [students] aware of the radical, political, cultural, social nature of our work and how it's impossible to escape those responsibilities. Those responsibilities ask of you as a citizen, as a human being, much less an architect to articulate what you believe in, and your work is a product of that. It can be nothing but that. I'm not saying this in a moralistic way, because I'm not even vaguely interested in that. It's a personal decision, but your work finally is articulated in terms of values. It's inescapable.

Advice for young and future architects: My single advice for my students is: "Observe the world and stay alert. Allow it to sink in. Your ideas are literally the summation, the product of your inquisitiveness and the way you are able to absorb knowledge, information, and situations, and translate them into architecture."

—Heather Livingston