



Yen Ha of Front Studio: Bringing thoughtful design into public awareness throughout the world

March 10, 2008 - Owners Developers & Managers

Since its inception in 2001, the enterprising firm of Front Studio - one of the few solely Asian-women owned architectural firms in the country - has been noted for its ability to challenge conventional notions of space, and blur the distinctions between art and architecture. Under the stewardship of Yen Ha, the practice has won several international competitions, with a diverse and impressive body of work spanning from the overhaul of a pedestrian overpass in Poland to the renovation of a Harlem townhouse.

Ha was born in Vietnam but moved to the United States in her earlier years where she grew up in a strict Vietnamese household. Her parents, both research scientists, encouraged her and her siblings to excel in academics and to spend much of their time reading and traveling. It was her childhood that piqued her interest into architecture and when it was time for college, Ha chose to study architecture at Carnegie Mellon University, where she met her now business partner Michi Yanagishita. Once she graduated, Ha subsequently continued her studies at the esteemed L'Ecole d'Architecture in Paris.

Since the completion of her studies, Ha has worked diligently at bringing thoughtful design into public awareness. Reluctant to participate in current trends and fashions, Front Studio's commitment to creativity ensures that every project undergoes a careful and comprehensive investigation. In addition to rigorous design methods, Ha instills projects with a sense of humor, recognizable in her whimsical proposals. She also pursues beauty and harmony in her design work, integrating formal studies with instinctual insight.

Front Studio's highly diversified clients include: The Badge Building Condominium in Long Island City, French Embassy Diplomatic Residences in New York, Fischer-Harling House, AXA Art Insurance Corporation Office, Village Kids Nursery and the Outdoor Gallery of the City of Gdansk.

In New York City, Front Studio's 2005 renovation of a one-bedroom downtown apartment focused on maximizing storage space for a stylish older couple who had amassed a lifetime of books, vinyl records, designer shoes and suits. The architects addressed the challenging project with creative methods such as a series of integrated bamboo cabinetry that perfectly accommodated storage needs while establishing a common design language for the space.

"We enjoy taking on projects where we can take risks with the space," said Ha. "Anyone can take an empty space and mimic the reigning style, but we are looking to capture the essence of the space, using our minds and imaginations to turn the space into something truly unique for the client."

At the Badge Building, a 44-unit residential condominium in Long Island City, Front Studio recently designed the lobby and all the interiors in the building, including the kitchens and baths. A steel entry portal gives way to a curved mosaic tiled wall colored marine blue and accented with yellow ribbons. Front Studio left the mushroom-shaped lobby columns white to enhance the contrast and

drama in the space. Says Ha: "We don't design spaces that are slick or cold. We want to bring out what can be exceptionally appealing about a space."

In upstate New York, Front Studio designed a rusted steel cube situated next to a traditional country house. The challenge of integrating the existing structure with a modern addition was addressed by re-cladding the existing house in bright blue aluminum siding while using a natural rusted siding for the addition. Extensive site analysis orientated the new structure so that the interior captures sunlight as it crosses the property and takes advantage of the client's favorite views of the surrounding landscape.

Closer to home, their whimsy is evident in their new offices at 239 Centre St. in Soho, which they recently gut renovated. The reception area and front office wall stand out using a lakeshore blue color and Front Studio's signature wallpaper -- a traditional floral pattern that upon closer look reveals hard hats, wigs and skyscrapers, to define the space. "We wanted witty wallpaper that graphically represented a two-women owned business in a field traditionally dominated by men," said Ha.

Being fluent in French, Vietnamese, Japanese and English, Ha and her partner often work on an international scale, collaborating with foreign clients based locally and abroad. For example, because of their international reach, Front Studio was recently retained by a Japanese developer in Harlem to renovate a 4,600 s/f townhouse. The project consisted of a full reconfiguration of the property to create two generously sized rental units and a bigger space for the owner's personal apartment on the parlor level. The owner preferred to speak with her designers in her native language, valued their understanding of Japanese culture and also relied heavily on Front Studio to serve as translators with her contractors throughout the entire construction process.

She calls herself an architect because it is a profession recognizable to most people, but Yen Ha is far more: designer, artist, visionary, builder and businesswoman. Whether speculative or realized, Ha is constantly inspired by her surroundings, discovering innovation and imagination in every opportunity.

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