



JOHN BECKMANN

designer

In head-to-toe black, John Beckmann stands near the window of his Midtown design studio and exhales a thick cloud of smoke from his Marlboro Light. “I feel really comfortable in black,” he says. “I like color, but I don’t like wearing color. I think it started in the ’80s with *Comme des Garçons*, and that became the standard, smart, avant-garde architect look.”

Beckmann’s unconventional-yet-charismatic creations seem to run in direct opposition to New York City’s architectural establishment. In recent years, he and his team of mavericks at Axis Mundi have challenged high-profile projects by renowned architects like Jean Nouvel and Renzo Piano by unveiling far more imaginative designs.

Despite the fact that none of his buildings have been constructed, his presence on the scene is influential and his ideas are gearing discussions in new directions. His counter-proposal to the Renzo Piano-designed downtown Whitney was named one of the top 10 by *Architizer* and *Curbed*, and his works have garnered critical attention in a number of publications that include *Archiworld*, *Designboom*, and the *New York Times*.

Known for his rogue initiatives and contrarian inclinations, Beckmann’s intriguing work refuses to be defined by a brand or movement. “I think movements fail, so why put a name on it? I like Francis Picabia’s approach,” he says. “He believes an artist should change their style as often as they change their shirt. I try to approach these things in a really fresh way and not get pigeonholed. I like that feeling when you have a pit in your stomach when something starts because you don’t know what to do.”

Interview: Scott Newman photo: Michael Halsband

POLYHEDRA



Scott Newman: So how does the founder of a successful interior design firm become what some might call an “architectural hacker?”

John Beckmann: Getting more into architecture is something I’ve always wanted to do and I think it was a natural outgrowth of doing design, interiors and furniture. Over the last six years I started designing projects that were in my head. First they were residential projects, and then larger scale conceptual projects like the MoMA Tower and the Whitney Museum proposal. I began doing this because the technology became available. You can put together a convincing proposal and renderings quickly, and that has put a lot of power in people’s hands. To quote William S. Burroughs, “Nothing is true, everything is permitted.” If it can be imagined then maybe it’s real. When that thinking intersects with the vitality of the Internet, normal channels are subverted and that creates new ways of navigating the entrenched establishment. With all that, I realize I can do a project, get it out there and create some tension. “Architectural hacking” promotes people participating, and I would like to open things up in a field that is very rigid and predictable.

SN: You received a lot of attention for your comment about Jean Nou-

vel’s MoMA Tower designs. Did you say he was “driving a stake through the heart of Manhattan?”



JB: Yes. The tower he proposed for MoMA was something like 1,250 feet tall. It’s this very thin, tapered spike that he said is the missing piece of the Manhattan skyline. I didn’t know that the missing piece was that large—the size of the Chrysler Building. Honestly, it just seemed really pretentious to even say something like that.

SN: So what was your idea for the missing piece of the Manhattan skyline?

JB: The piece we did called “Vertical Neighborhood” was inspired by looking at the favelas in Brazil. There is a classic book from the ‘60s called “Architecture Without Architects” that has great photographs of Italian hill towns and things that are sort of randomly piled and grow over a long period of time. They weren’t designed by one brilliant mind. They just sort of happened, and I think in that way the

IMAGE: ALTERNATIVE MOMA TOWER OPPOSITE: ARK HOUSE

favelas are fascinating. We took cues from that, and instead of making them out of brick and stucco, we took different modernist icons or signature styles and assembled those in a random way. In a way it was a snide putdown to how architecture is designed. It usually comes out of one great mind, the genius, and has a fountainhead sort of approach. Really it takes a 150-person team to design a skyscraper, but it’s the genius behind the whole thing that gets the recognition.

SN: Can there be avant-garde architecture in New York City?

JB: I think it’s difficult. If you look at the stuff going on in other places in the world, like China, developers in New York don’t seem to take too many chances or do enough to encourage contemporary architecture.



SN: What about the new downtown Whitney?

JB: Renzo Piano is building the Whitney, and he’s a great architect, but I was surprised when I saw the first renderings because it seemed

like it could be anywhere. It looked out of context. I could imagine him scribbling something on a napkin over a \$40 hamburger and a nice bottle of wine at Cipriani, and people shook hands and that was it. That was a project where I said, ‘Well that doesn’t really make sense.’ So I imagined it as a matrix, a kind of cage where all of the different spaces were inserted. The idea is that the spaces are literally bridges that go from one side of the building to the other, floating within this matrix. The Renzo Piano thing is more of a warehouse. As much as I like his work, I think that not everybody does interesting things all of the time.

SN: So what are you doing with all this? What’s the freedom for you?

JB: I’m not a registered architect. I’m not part of the American Institute of Architects or any other professional organization, so I don’t have to please anyone. I do it because I think it’s fun. It would be nice if architecture was more open and not just the usual rhythm and roll of predictable people doing things. Why shouldn’t someone who isn’t an architect have interesting ideas and be able to do an interesting building? Do you really have to be an architect to do an interesting building or think about architecture? The architecture profession would say yes, but I don’t think so.

ALTERNATIVE WHITNEY DOWNTOWN



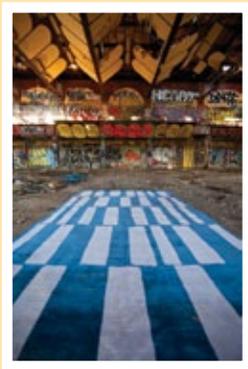


40 Bond St.

“Designed by Herzog & de Meuron, 40 Bond is one of my favorite buildings built in the last few years. It has a wonderful glittering façade and I love how light reflects off the cast glass spandrels. The cast aluminum gate at street level with its graffiti-inspired form is fun. It twists and turns like the line drawn by a thick magic-marker tagging, a nice nod to street culture. Overall it’s a clever reinterpretation of New York’s downtown loft vernacular, via the eyes of the Swiss duo.”

40 Bond St.
(btwn Bowery & Lafayette Ave.)
New York, NY 10012
40bond.com

photo: Kaja Kühl



Carini Lang

“I love what Joe Carini is doing with carpets. They are very chic, sophisticated and well-made natural products that rival the quality of the best carpets of past epochs.”

335 Greenwich St.
(btwn Jay St. & Duane St.)
New York, NY 10013
(646) 613-0497
carinilang.com

photo: Raafi Rivero



Delorenzo 1950

“Delorenzo 1950 has museum-grade vintage furniture from French designers from the 1950s—Jean Prouve, Charlotte Perriand, Jean Royere, and George Nakashima, among others. Bring your checkbook!”

440 Lafayette St.
(btwn St. Marks Pl. & Waverly Pl.)
New York, NY 10003
(212) 995-1950

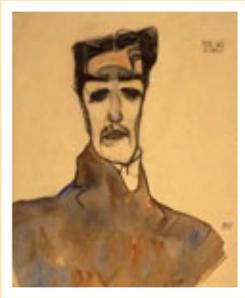


**Mark Bar
@ The Mark Hotel**

“We had our office party there last year. The Mark Bar, designed by Jacques Grange with specially made furnishings by Guy de Rougemont and Vladimir Kagan, is a swanky meeting spot on the Upper East Side. I love the crowd; the one percent with money to burn. It’s over the top!”

25 E. 77th St.
(btwn 5th Ave. and Madison Ave.)
New York, NY 10003
(917) 720-2729
themarkhotel.com

photo: Julie Glassberg



Neue Galerie

“This is one of my favorite New York museums. You feel like you’ve teleported to Vienna. They had a great exhibition last year on the eccentric 18th century sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt. He’s famous for his character heads, a collection of busts with faces contorted in extreme facial expressions. A lot of museums these days tend to feel very mall-like, and I start looking for a GAP store or Starbucks or something. You don’t feel that way in the Neue.”

1048 5th Ave.
(btwn 85th St. & 86th St.)
New York, NY 10028
(212) 628-6200
neuegalerie.org

photo: Egon Schiele, Mime van Osen, 1910



The Odeon

“I still like The Odeon if I’m in TriBeCa. It’s the real granddaddy of the area’s hip spots. It was the stomping ground for the likes of Warhol and Basquiat when it opened almost 30 years ago. I use to go there before heading to the Mudd Club, as it was just around the corner.”

145 W. Broadway
(btwn Duane St. & Thomas St.)
New York, NY 10013
(212)233-0507
theodeonrestaurant.com

photo: Peter Manzari

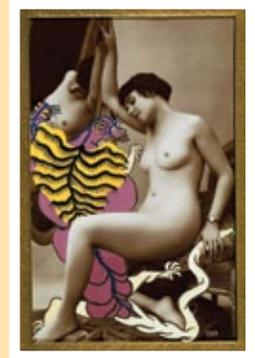


Poltrona Frau

“We use a lot of pieces from Poltrona Frau, the great Italian leather furniture company, like my favorite sofa, The Kennedee, and some swanky pieces by the late Italian architect Gio Ponti.”

145 Wooster St.
(btwn Prince St. & E. Houston)
New York, NY 10012
(212) 777-7592
frauusa.com

photo: Diana Bejarano



Ubu Gallery

“Ubu is a cool gallery on the Upper East Side that is dedicated to 20th Century avant-garde art with a focus on 1920s and 1930s Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism. They always have great shows on obscure, under-the-radar artists.”

416 E. 59th St.
(btwn 1st A e. & Sutton Pl.)
New York, NY 10022
(212) 753-4444
ubugallery.com

photo: © ADAGP & Myrtille Hugnet
Georges Hugnet, La Granivelle d'Austerlitz [“The Austerlitz Spandle”] No. 30 from the series La Vie Amoureuse des Spumifères [“The Love Life of the Spumifers”], 1947-48