TIMELESS ELEGANCE

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AD's 2012 INNOVATORS: Design's New Guard
The 2012 AD Innovators

Whether experimenting with digital technology, transforming well-worn terrain, or rethinking ancient crafts, these eight cutting-edge talents are challenging received wisdom and conjuring a bold new world.

JANET ECHELMAN

With her billowing public artworks, an ambitious artist is changing the very essence of urban spaces.

Cities are a perfect foil for Janet Echelman, whose suspended sculptures made from intricately woven netting hover among buildings and over parks like aerial lace, redefining urban environments. A deep attunement with the power of place has driven her to develop a unique genre of public art that embraces both venerable craft and modern technology. “The spaces I want to be in are nurturing and soft and saturated with color,” says Echelman, whose works exude just such sensations. “Our cities don’t have enough of that, and as humans we need it.”

Based in Brookline, Massachusetts, the artist forged her creative practice...
serendipitously: In 1996 she arrived in India on a Fulbright scholarship only to find that her painting supplies had been lost in transit. Not one to be deterred, she watched local fishermen bundling their nets and realized the same mesh—delicate yet full of volume—could be a medium all its own.

To produce her first major project, for a park in Vilnius, Lithuania, Echelman relied on new computer software to model the effects of the elements on her materials. In addition to programmers, she has collaborated with lacemakers, acoustical engineers, and a nautical expert, not to mention NASA scientists. Such partnerships have expanded her understanding of what’s possible. “I imagine a form,” she explains, “and I find a way to make it real.”

Her creations seem to defy gravity, reacting to air currents and enlivening everyday surroundings. In Phoenix’s Civic Space Park, a monumental vortex of synthetic webbing is animated by the wind, giving the plaza instant heart, while an installation outside the Denver Art Museum echoed the rippling movement of a tsunami in gossamer fabric.

What’s next for Echelman? In a departure, she is devising a curtain of mist that will rise in response to subway trains moving beneath a historic Philadelphia square. And the artist’s sights are set on projects the size of high-rises, which might travel from city to city. “I can picture pieces hanging from satellites,” she says. “I’m trying to push all kinds of boundaries.”  

—PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

HOUZZ

Forward-thinking and fast-growing, an upstart website is revolutionizing the way we see our homes

After buying their Palo Alto, California, house in 2006, Alon Cohen and Adi Tatarko struggled to find the right people to renovate it. “We didn’t know how to express what we wanted,” Tatarko says. “The process was very unpleasant.”

Unpleasant, perhaps, but not unproductive. Realizing that others could benefit from online visual tools to help communicate their aesthetic desires, the couple launched Houzz—a website that, using Silicon Valley savvy and robust search technology, has cracked open the sometimes insular and intimidating world of architecture and interior design. Professionals post photos of their projects, users filter images by room or style to compile favorites, and everyone engages in free-flowing discussion.

What began in 2009 as a Bay Area service has since expanded rapidly to cities across America and even internationally. The site is now visited by some six million unique viewers each month (with millions more using its iPhone and iPad apps) and offers 500,000-plus photos from over 85,000 design experts, any one of whom shouldn’t be surprised to hear from a certain busy couple in Palo Alto. “We’re not done with our house yet,” says Tatarko, adding that she and Cohen still use the site for their own projects. “It’s an ongoing process.”  

—TIM MCKEOUGH