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in
Whitewall
May 2014
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Benshetrit

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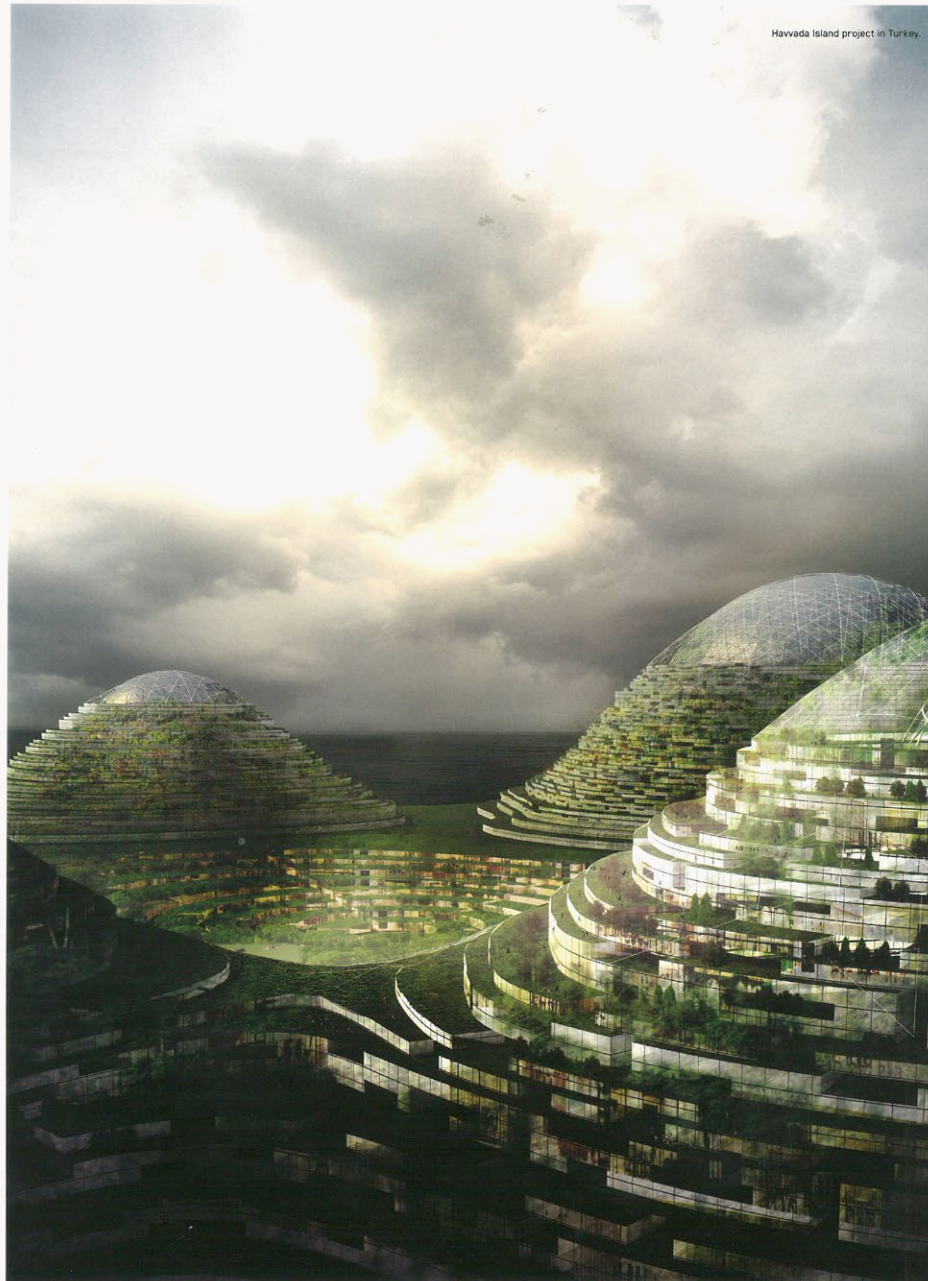
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“WHEN I THINK ABOUT DESIGN, I THINK ABOUT EVERYTHING THAT NATURE DIDN'T CREATE”

“I want to talk to you about who Dror Benshetrit is—the personality behind your success as a designer.” I was speaking to Benshetrit as he sat in one of the famous Peacock Chairs, which he designed for Cappellini, in his trendy glass office on Varick Street.

The Israeli-born designer, who studied product design in the Netherlands and later worked in Paris, established his studio in New York in 2002. Whereas his work historically dealt with product and interior design for such companies as Alessi, Boffi, and Puma, his focus shifted to architectural design and urban planning beginning in 2008 as a result of his involvement with Nurai, a man-made island off the coast of Abu Dhabi.

WHITEWALL: *Tell me what has happened professionally since the last time Whitewall interviewed you.*

DROR BENSHETRIT: Wow. A lot has happened since four years ago. Things are moving crazy fast, and every year that goes by is overwhelming. We have had commissions that I never believed we would get—mainly in architecture. And this has caused a lot of changes in the way I think, in the way I see design, and in the way that I see my own contribution to this world.

WW: *Give me an example.*

DB: I've always been interested in innovation. Design was the excuse, and design was the instrument to manifest my interest in innovation and a way to get it out because my passion is for beautiful things. I've always had this interest, which I call kind of holistic, which is that design relates to everything that is around us and everything we do.

When I think about design, I think about everything that nature didn't create. So when I came to New York, my education was in art and design, not in architecture. But I always had issues with boundaries. People

have always tried to put me in boxes. For me it was all about breaking those boxes and labels in design, architecture, and art.

WW: *Was it difficult?*

DB: Of course it was and it still is. Titles and definitions are ways for us to create comfort zones. And for me, just because I was never searching for these things, I felt free to be whatever I wanted. We are transformable human beings. One moment we can be upset; the next moment we can be super-excited; we want to feel different things. Right now I want to feel the wind on my face. Sometimes I want to sit in a dark room next to candlelight; sometimes I feel like listening to loud music and like letting my body go free, the same as we do as in any profession. Right now I am very much into architecture design.

WW: *What made you shift from designing products to designing buildings, cities, and islands?*

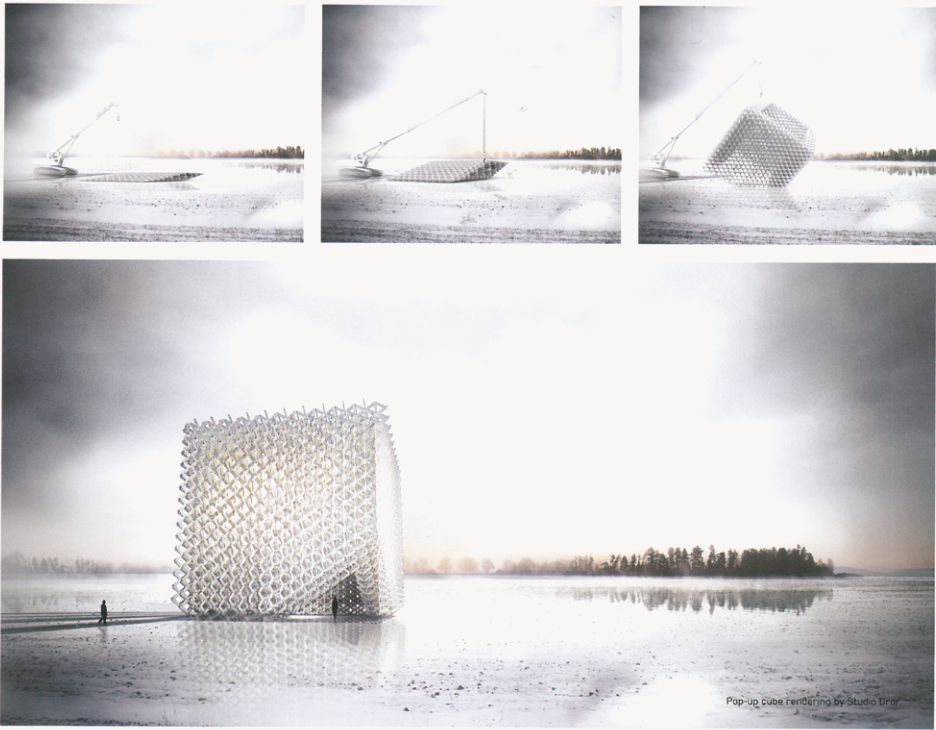
DB: The shift started with the Abu Dhabi project, which was sold in 2008 and did ridiculously well. But our real love affair with architecture started around 2010 with the planning of the Havvada Island.

One day I was approached by a Turkish developer named Serdar Inan. He said to me, “I love the way you are thinking. The Turkish government and I have a very difficult challenge, which we don't know how to solve. We are looking to build a canal between the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara. It will be 46 kilometers, and we going to have about a billion cubic meters of land that we don't know what to do with.”

This developer is a guy who pushes boundaries and always thinks outside the box. So we took the challenge and we worked on a proposal, and after a few months we presented our vision. It has been well received because it was very vanguard, very different.

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WW: *What was so different about it?*

DB: We showed him that a billion cubic meters of land can create an artificial island in the Black Sea, approximately one kilometer from the shore, which would be about a quarter of Manhattan. I explained to him how we could build a little city that would be an extension of Istanbul, which is something that he was fascinated by because one of the things that he pointed out to us in our initial meetings was that Istanbul has major issues with traffic, pollution, infrastructure, garbage collection, and so forth. So he said that this was a fantastic opportunity to see what a 21st-century city could actually look like. This is kind of how I work: Give me a challenge that takes over my brain, and that's it—it becomes my world. The more I thought about it and visualized it, the more I realized that this was a very different challenge from everything I had done before.

WW: *Do you ever have doubts?*

DB: I do. I say no to projects when I feel that the partners approaching us are not really interested in innovation. When they say, "We love that building over there—we want something just like that," those are the kinds of projects that I turn down.

Was I intimidated by the island project? Of course, but for me that's also the beauty of it, that and the fact that we never work on projects in a vacuum. We always collaborate with what we call "the knowledge that we are lacking." For instance, with the Havvada Island we sat and thought about the issues that cities have, such as the lack of views or transportation, then we invited structural engineers, planners, landscapers, and asked them those questions.

Over the years we have been practicing design, many say, "This will never happen," so we look for those up to the challenge, who are open-minded

and willing to entertain an idea. For me that's the power of innovation. I hope not to reach (at least not too soon) a point in my career when knowledge is going to clog my naiveté and my questions are going to be more structured and adult-like.

WW: *Your first successful creation, "The Vase of Phases" which you designed for Rosenthal, seems more like the end of your naiveté era. Were you frustrated back then?*

DB: Yes, absolutely! The whole story of the vase was about New York. I came here planning to live here and it was so hard. I was 24. I just spent a few amazing years in the Netherlands and France and I was overwhelmed. I was sure I am going to capture the world in a day, start my own firm, but reality was different. I had less than the rent of the first month of the apartment that I took in Williamsburg. I knocked on many doors. Not too many of them opened, so I felt a little bit broken. At that point I did lose a chunk of my naiveté. Wow, It feels like yesterday, but it was years ago.

WW: *What made you come to New York?*

DB: For many years I was asking myself if in fact if I had made the right choice. I loved Europe. When I started to think about leaving, everybody said to me that it was a mistake. But I felt I would always be a foreigner there, and I didn't like that feeling. New York was really the only place that I felt like I wouldn't feel that way. The second thing that made me come to New York was the speed of the way things seem to happen here. I am very fast; I think fast; I do things fast; I like the energy of the city. It feeds me. And I love the sense of freedom that I feel here. Coincidentally or not, freedom is the meaning of my name in Hebrew.



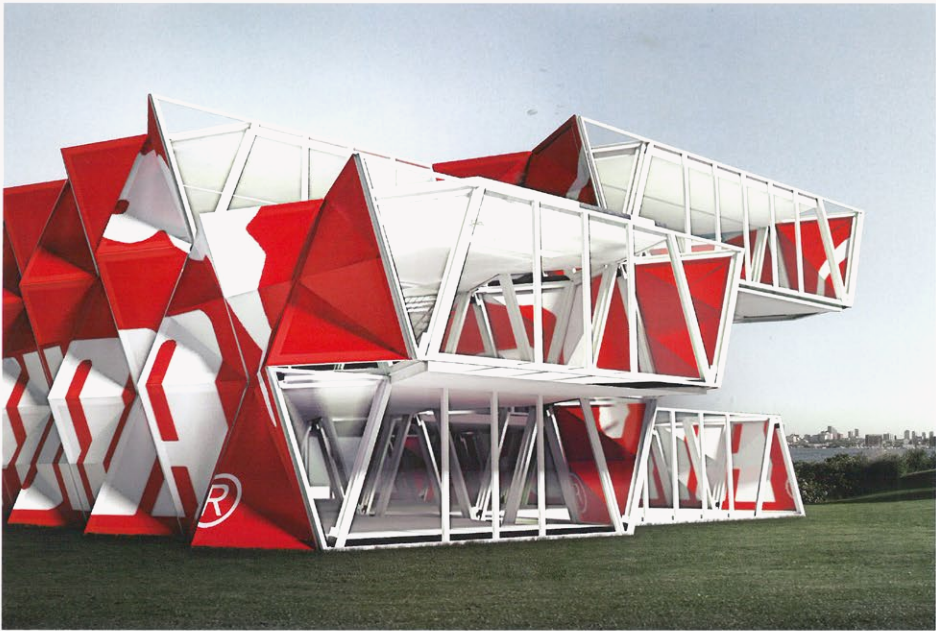
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WW: *As a kid growing up in Tel Aviv in the seventies, was there something in your childhood that inspired you to go into design?*

DB: First, my parents. I come from a family where art and design were quite foreign. As a child, it was my passion. They felt it and never put a question mark next to it because it was my world. I loved going to museums, looking at paintings and sculpture, and creating them. I remember I used to come home from school and show them my paintings and they used to go “Wow, this is amazing,” but they weren’t educated about art and yet they gave me confidence and endless love. For me it was a huge benefit that they didn’t come from art, because it made me become my own evaluator. It was up to my judgment, and it has always been, and that is how I have built my own style and personality.

Second, Israel. Israel is a very interesting place. There is never right or wrong. There are always two sides; there is always tension. Because of my childhood in Israel, I never took anything for granted. When I was 14 I was decorating windows. I had like a little tool kit with staple gun, scissors, fishing wires, and needles. I would go to stores and offer them my services. One day I entered a suit store and the owner looked at me with a big smile and asked me if I knew how to tie a tie, because this was what was needed. I had no clue how to do it, but without hesitation I said, “Of course I know! You think that I would come to such a respectable store not knowing how to tie a tie? Let me come tomorrow, give you the first window for free, and show you how professionally I tie ties.”

The man said, “Okay.” Then I ran home to my dad to learn. He taught me how to do it on my leg, and that’s how I still do it to this day. I was struggling the whole day with that window and surprisingly he liked the end result. The whole experience was innovative and carefree.

Another big part of my innovative side came from my army service.

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I joined a unit that invented ways to fight terror. This unit is all about these unexpected moments of “If a terrorist attacked like that, how would you defend yourself?” All of a sudden, I found myself inventing jumping targets and other things, which lead me to ask myself, “What is this? Is it art or design?” Which led me to search for schools that combine both.

WW: *Why Europe?*

DB: I decided to study in Europe because I felt like I wanted to explore. When you live in Israel, you feel like you are in a bubble, like the world is much bigger than this. Even as a kid, I felt that way. Maybe because my father was working for an airline company and flew a lot, I felt like the world was small and accessible. Holland and Design Academy Eindhoven was the best choice I could ever make. Coming from Israel was a cultural shock because Holland is a country that has no problems, at least not compared to Israel. This environment gave me the freedom to focus on school and projects and be one hundred percent immersed in that.

Top:
Puma pop-up pavilion design.

Bottom:
Quadrone villa rendering.

When school ended, I was offered an internship in Paris at a studio that belonged to the head of my school. It was a studio that used to do trend forecasting. My days were crazy. I had a pile of magazines on one side of the table, and at the end of the day the pile would be on the other side of the table. I would go through hundreds of pages and create a vision for new projects. It was an amazing experience working and living in Paris. It was also the one time in my life that I had a structured day job. It hasn’t happened since then.

When you work for yourself, your brain never leaves the office. I kind of enjoyed it because I knew that this would be the only time in my life that I would have the opportunity to do that.

WW: *So you always knew you would own your own business?*

DB: Always. I had no doubt about that. In fact, I never wanted to work for anybody.

WW: *Design is a little feminine, isn’t it?*

DB: It is true, but I have always felt comfortable with my own sexuality. Creation in Kabbala is a woman’s thing, so a man who creates is in touch with his feminine side. I always find a very interesting balance in what I do because innovation has a scientific side to it, and the design side is more of how to make it look good and sexy.

WW: *What is the most exciting trend in innovation?*

DB: There is a search for honesty and truth, which differs a little bit from before. You find this in so many things, not just in design, but everywhere. I really like this trend: the honesty comes sometimes in a form of leaving things not perfectly authentic.

That’s one of the reasons why I am so excited about the architectural projects we are working on now. I love the complex challenges, things that have millions of details that touch each other.

WW: *What is your dream project?*

DB: Well, there are those projects that you dream about in terms of scale, like designing an airplane. They are very exciting because of their size. But there is also something else that has almost a historical significant meaning. A few years ago, I designed the interior of a synagogue in Manhattan. I hope to have the opportunity to design a mosque and a church, not from a religious standpoint but more from the place of spirituality.

WW: *You recently had a baby. How did it affect your design or professional approach, if at all?*

DB: A lot. First of all, I started to use a slightly different vocabulary. I started to simplify things. I have become more focused. I don’t waste my time on irrelevant things or little things that before I used to cloud the important stuff. Sometimes I look at how she looks at things. She is so opinionated. She knows what she likes and what she doesn’t. She points at things she wants and she pushes other things away. So when I look at stuff, I try to think like her. It is the idea of putting the knowledge aside once in a while and just feel, pure feeling, pure emotion.