Dror Benshetrit
in Bloomberg Pursuits
December 2014

The End of Chocolate
Can science save the world’s most-endangered food?

Dror Benshetrit isn’t licensed to design overwater megamansions or an entire Turkish neighborhood. But that hasn’t stopped him.

Photographs by François Dischinger

Benshetrit in his Manhattan home jacket by Vijay Arora.
IF YOU WERE

a 25-year-old designer from Tel Aviv, with plenty of talent but no cash, you might, in the middle of your first New York winter, have an overpowering desire to smash something. For Dror Benshetrit, that moment came in 2002. “That last year was beyond tough,” he remembers. “I felt like a broken vessel.”

Three years later, the metaphor yielded an autobiographical design: a vase that looks like it was shattered and put back together by someone with poor eyesight and a gaggle of Krazy Glue. Benshetrit called it the Vase of Phases—a reference not to an evocative emotional state but rather its multiphase manufacturing process. Not everyone was convinced. “Some people saw it as an end-of-relationship present,” he says, laughing. “Someone wrote that it’s the perfect Mother’s Day gift, an echo of all the china broken in family fights. For me, it’s a kid losing his naïveté.”

The vase—comes in luminous black or white—and, invariably, do Benshetrit’s skirts. Now 37, he’s the embodiment of minimalist Manhattan chic: his palate is glossy, his body slim, his English shelled with a light Israeli accent. After only a dozen years as a professional designer, he has leapt from self-revelatory housewares to large-scale architecture. Workers are now finishing his 3.5-hectare (7.5-acre) island redoubt, replete with subterranean and overwater residences, off the coast of Abu Dhabi. Already, he has reached the one-same plane of cool. His firm is called Dror, and that’s how his 10 employees and innumerable collaborators refer to him too.

When the 6-foot-2-inch (1.8-meter) designer sits, he folds up like a multipurpose knife, but he doesn’t stay that way for long. He jumps up as if spring-loaded to pop-open a suitcase he designed; to flip-open his collapsible Pick Chair one-handed; to demonstrate the single- yet-veritable interlocking construction system he calls QualaDror. He gives off the same air of gracefulness efficiency that his objects do, a sense that he can switch at will from relaxation to frenzy and back again.

Today, Benshetrit specializes in just about everything. He has designed an expandable file folder for Target Corp. that retails for $5.99 and an entire fantastical neighborhood in Turkey. Some mornings, he arrives at his littlest lower Manhattan office to refine a cleverly utilitarian object—a table lamp that transforms into a task light, say. He spends other days working out how the QualaDror system could be used to erect housing for disaster victims in a matter of hours. “Scale is not what makes things complex,” he says.

Benshetrit has joined a tiny cohort of chameleons, like Marc Newson and Philippe Starck, who slip back and forth between the related-yet-separate worlds of architecture and product design. His success doesn’t come from wide-ranging expertise—he’s not even a licensed architect—but from the ingenious deployment of ignorance. “I come from a place of naivety,” he says, “which allows me to ask questions and push boundaries.” Free from received limitations, Benshetrit succeeds by throwing himself at their mercy. “I set up a certain vision, which when you share it with people who really know what they’re doing say, ‘Are you crazy? We can’t do that!’ But slowly the idea becomes more and more intelligent.”

Benshetrit vanishes and returns bearing a piece of luggage he designed for Tumi Inc. He strokes the shiny, faceted surface, which carries an echo of the broken vase but is structurally stronger than a flat plane, he reaches in and pulls a strap

miraculously, the volume of the carry-on increases by 50 percent. He pulls a second strap, and the case doubles from its original dimensions. He applies downward pressure, and the whole apparatus retracts to its starting size.

Although he enjoys these little feats of prestidigitation, Benshetrit points out that producing magic is a laborious process of refinement, conducted at a workbench, not a computer. “We made 40 prototypes that failed,” he says proudly. “The spring mechanism was wrong, or the material was wrong, or the magnetic clasp that holds a laptop in place was too resistant. We were shaving off micrometers of magnet.”

Benshetrit grew up in Israel and graduated from the Design Academy Eindhoven, in the Netherlands, which he chose because it lets artistic disciplines bleed into one another. He

THE ACCIDENTAL ARCHITECT

BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON

Tips based on Benshetrit’s QualaDror interlocking construction system

Benshetrit’s Pick Chair morphs into a flat, four-panel plane with a flick of the wrist.

His 49 rearrangements on an island off Abu Dhabi sold out in 72 hours.
in Bloomberg Pursuits

December 2014

Dror Benshetrit

The accidental architect

continued from page 46

mainland Abu Dhabi into a hyperrealistic development. Instead of bringing a proven pleaser of plutocrats, Shro talked Zaya CEO Nadia Saad into visiting Dror, even though at that point the developer hadn’t built so much as a toileted. Saad gave Benshetrit eight weeks to come up with a presentation. The designer bought a six-pack of Red Bull from a kiosk and embarked on an all-nighter.

Benshetrit began with the assumption that many of Zaya’s presumptive clients could easily buy their own spit of sand in the middle of the Persian Gulf. Why would they choose a piece of Nurai Island instead? Because, he concluded, people had proven their apathy to isolation to the real thing. Benshetrit imagined himself a lonely potentate standing at his bedroom balcony. “I don’t want to see anybody or any- thing, but I do want to have a cigar with a neighbor,” he says. “I don’t want to see any servants, but I do want to turn around and find fresh towels.” Benshetrit produced a series of airy, opulent hobbit holes and modernist overwater villas and then—because he couldn’t travel to Abu Dhabi on an Israeli passport and make the presentation himself—e-mailed the whole thing off.

“i got a call while i was in a taxi coming back from Art Basel Miami,’’ Benshetrit recalls. “They said: ‘we’ve shown your presentation to the crown prince. He wants to build it.’ I just started laughing hysterically. A week later, I was sitting in a room with a guy from another name— it engineers, swearing as if I’d just come from a spitballing class. I said: ‘Guys, I’m not an architect. I have a vision and I would love to share it with you, but I don’t know how to build it.’ By saying that, I challenged them to make the idea a reality.”

The 49 properties went on the market in 2008, even before construction had begun. Zaya sold every one—nearly $1 billion in sales and pathways. “The usual response to infrastructure is like chips on a mother- board: stiffish structures that take what they need,” Benshetrit says. “I was trying to envision a way that they could connect differently.”

As Benshetrit talks, you can imagine the entire glittering metropolis moving in a single graceful motion and then standing back to watch a village expand into a township and then into a sprawling megalopolis, where everything works and, with the right push, urban disorder is neatly stored away.