

# Dror

in  
**Bloomberg  
Pursuits**  
December  
2014  
Dror  
Benshetrit



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DROR BENSHTTRIT 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 Yigal Azrouël.*



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Dror Benshetrit



## THE ACCIDENTAL ARCHITECT

BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON

*Toys based on Benshetrit's QuaDror interlocking construction system*

## 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 first 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 gallon jug of Krazy Glue. Benshetrit called it the Vase of Phases—a reference not to an evolving emotional state but rather its multistep 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 naiveté."

The vase comes in lustrous black or white—and so, invariably, do Benshetrit's shirts. Now 37, he's the embodiment of minimalist Manhattan chic: his pate is glossy, his body slim, his English shellacked 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 just now finishing up his 3-hectare (7-acre) island redoubt, replete with subterranean and overwater residences, off the coast of Abu Dhabi. Already, he has reached the one-name 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 (1.9-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 or to demonstrate the simple-yet-versatile interlocking construction system he calls QuaDror. He gives off the same air of graceful 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 loftlike 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 QuaDror 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 naiveté," he says, "which allows me to ask questions and push boundaries." Free from received limitations, Benshetrit seduces experts 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 yanks a strap;



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



*His 49 megamansions on an island off Abu Dhabi sold out in 72 hours.*

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 retreats 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



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*The designer's plan for a minicity of six geodesic domes on an island in Istanbul*



*A detail of the QuaDror system, which has the flexibility of an Erector Set*

considered staying in Europe but decided he needed a city that matched his high-speed metabolism and that wouldn't look askance at his fierce ambition. Besides, he didn't want to be a permanent outsider. "Here, everyone's a foreigner," he says, "and therefore nobody is."

It helped that he had a youthful uncle, emerging fashion designer Yigal Azrouël, who in 2002 was getting ready to open his first boutique in the suddenly incandescent Meatpacking District. Benshetrit lobbied for the job of designing the store and showered Azrouël with drawings. His dubious uncle kept interviewing other firms. "He said, 'You're not an interior architect,'" Benshetrit recalls. "I said, 'No, but I understand *you*.'"

Eventually, Azrouël came around and chose Benshetrit's design; his newbie nephew assuaged Azrouël's rising panic by

recruiting a team of pros. "I realized that neither I nor my client had ever done a store before," Benshetrit says, "so we should be the only two with no experience." The result—a warm, dramatic harmony of weathered brick, bentwood furnishings and theatrical spotlights that made shoppers feel like stars—put both designers on New York's retail map. Benshetrit was still living on pizza and art-gallery-opening canapés, but he set up a studio in the store's basement and hired his first employee.

From the beginning, Benshetrit possessed strengths clients could easily appreciate. He approached design physically and empathetically, imagining a product the way a user might handle it, not the way a photographer would frame it for a catalog shoot. Benshetrit believed that objects should be able to transform themselves with ease. His combination of confidence and humility allowed him to ignore conventional wisdom but seek out expert advice. And he knew how to translate each visual idea into a brief and vivid, if sometimes perplexing, story, so that prospective clients could form a bond with an object even before he had drawn it.

Benshetrit points to his Peacock Chair, a fan of folded bright-blue felt. "This began when I was trying to get over a breakup and realized I had to let go," he says. "There are two ways of doing that. One is to build a wall and completely disconnect from your emotions. The other is to let yourself be free to feel and share what you're feeling." That thought put him in mind of the peacock, which fans its tail feathers for two diametrically opposed reasons: "Either it's a warning—'Stay away from me; I'm big'—or it's, 'Come and look at how beautiful I am!'" Benshetrit's chain of inspirations, from a broken romance to the defensive and mating postures of peacocks, is so idiosyncratic that the explanation feels less like a sales pitch than a dream. Suddenly, the chair has acquired a fresh emotional resonance.

Among Benshetrit's early admirers was Michael Shvo, another handsome, swashbuckling Israeli expat with an eye for inventive design. Shvo was a creature of the pre-recession boom years, a real estate superbroker with an intuitive sense of how to please the impossibly rich. The two men met in 2007 when Shvo was looking to evolve into a developer. "After spending 10 minutes with Dror, it was clear to me that his way of looking at things is completely different from anyone I've ever worked with," Shvo recalls. "And yet our beliefs are quite similar. Innovation is your insurance for success; that's how you create value."

Shvo asked Benshetrit whether he felt comfortable designing a seven-story building. With a mixture of bluff and bravado, Benshetrit said, "Absolutely." Three months later, Shvo called back to say the building was now a 25-story tower: 325 Lexington Ave., in the east 30s, a real estate no man's land Shvo wanted to jazz up.

"The whole reason I brought him on board was that he didn't have experience," Shvo says. "An architect who has done something a hundred times will deliver the same thing they've done a hundred times before." The model Benshetrit produced looked as though it had been made by a kindergartner sloppily stacking blocks.

The recession killed the project, but Shvo was just getting started. While the rest of the world was falling apart, he teamed up with United Arab Emirates-based developer Zaya to turn fishhook-shaped Nurai Island off *(continued on page 108)*

#### The Accidental Architect

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mainland Abu Dhabi into a hyperexclusive development. Instead of hiring a proven pleaser of plutocrats, Shvo talked Zaya CEO Nadia Zaal into visiting Dror, even though at that point the designer hadn't built so much as a toolshed. Zaal gave Benshetrit eight weeks to come up with a presentation. The designer bought a six-pack of Red Bull from a bodega 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 instead? Because, he concluded, people preferred the illusion of isolation to the real thing.

Benshetrit imagined himself a lonely potentate standing at his bedroom balcony. "I don't want to see anybody or anything, 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 geotechnical, construction and you-name-it engineers, sweating as if I'd just come from a spinning 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 of real estate—in 72 hours. Still forbidden from entering Abu Dhabi, Benshetrit attempted to manage the project from a distance but wound up losing control. When he finally did visit Nurai—on a brand-new U.S. passport after first becoming a citizen—he was both exhilarated and disappointed. "They made some decisions that will ruin some of the experience, absolutely," he says, but he considers the project one more step in his process of continuous transformation.

Although Nurai is essentially a moated community that relatively few will ever visit, it cemented Benshetrit's credentials as a visionary on a large scale. Which is why, in 2011, Turkish developer Serdar Inan invited him to Istanbul.

Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had been considering carving a new waterway through the city, from the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara. The project would divert hazardous cargo from the city center, and it would dredge up vast quantities of soil—landfill with which to extend the overcrowded metropolis. Inan took Benshetrit around the city, pointed out its charms and dysfunctions and asked him to think of ways to use the dirt dug out of the future canal for a better Istanbul. "At that point, I realized I was actually going to get paid to create a utopia," Benshetrit marvels.

Never one to duck a challenge, Benshetrit retreated to his studio and emerged with another concept straight out of Tolkien: a troglodytic minicity. A ring of six immense geodesic domes would occupy an artificial island. Inside would be offices, movie theaters, museums and multistory shopping malls. Outside would be terraced hillside lined with apartments, like a 21st-century answer to the cave dwellings of Cappadocia, to the southeast.

There's something counterintuitive about placing private quarters in plain view and turning public functions inward. For Benshetrit, the gesture invokes dance. "It's like a circle of people holding hands," he says. "If we're after solitude and privacy, we face out. When we want to share, we face in."

Such an ambitious project is unlikely ever to be built. However, it did yield an intriguing way forward for cities. Instead of erecting vertical buildings on a horizontal site, Benshetrit envisions horizontal buildings on a vertical site, all linked by a circulatory system of power, water, data and pathways. "The usual relationship to infrastructure is like chips on a motherboard: selfish 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 him pulling a strap in a single, graceful motion and then standing back to watch a village expand into a town and a town into a slumless megalopolis, where everything works and, with the right push, urban disorder is neatly stowed away. ©