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BGC Teen Voices: Spotlight on Contemporary Designers

Allison Mead
Jan Greben

JAN GREBEN BY ALLISON MEAD

Allison: Can you tell me a little about yourself and your work?

Jan: I'm an architect. I do research and I teach. My practice is a combination of these three areas. I did my undergraduate degree in architecture at the University of Toronto and as soon as I graduated I moved to New York to work for the Italian architect Aldo Rossi. After that I worked for Smith-Miller + Hawkinson, and François de Menil, before doing a graduate degree at Columbia University, working for Keenen/Riley, and starting my own office. My practice has evolved to a point where I work almost exclusively with clients in creative fields: photo editors, a fashion designer, writers, photographers, creative directors. One project leads to the next because they know each other or see each other's places; they are a community.

A: What is architecture to you?

J: Architecture is concerned with the built environment. It functions on different levels. There is a theoretical and conceptual side to it, and then a practical and material side. In the best case, it is both artistic and highly functional, and can improve the lives of individuals, communities, cities.

A: Can you briefly describe your design style?

J: I try to stay away from "style" as a description of it. I am interested in aspects that are integral to how a space gets used, the coming together of materials, the qualities of light and air, and the specific context of a building. There's certainly an aesthetic involved in it, and I'm interested in doing very thoughtful and considered work, but "style" seems to me to be something that's too reflective of trends and qualities that might not be lasting. In many ways my work is modernist, but a modernism of the present day. Generally the people that ask me to work with them are interested in that sensibility. I'm very interested in the economy of space, the flexible use of space; I think those two go together well. I said 'economy', but I would also say a certain modesty of space is appealing to me. I don't like the idea of wasted material or wasted space, and I respond to a certain kind of modesty of space and a scale that's relatable that can mean many things for different people. There are certain projects that I gravitate to for that

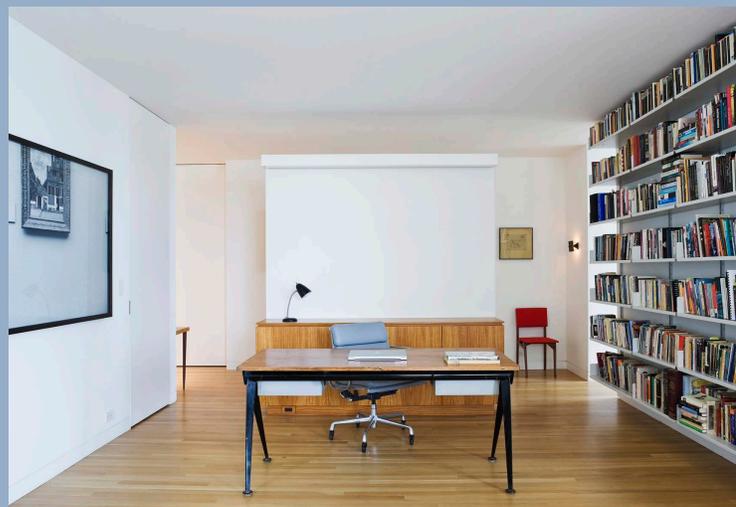
reason, such as Eileen Gray's houses E-1027 and Tempe à Pailla, or Le Corbusier's house for his parents.



Eileen Gray: Tempe à Pailla, exhibition, NYIT, 2016 photograph: Annie Schlechter

A: How do you go about using color in your work?

J: Some of it's conscious and some of it's intuitive, I think if every color is strong they just compete with each other, so I think that it's about having a functional hierarchy where some spaces or objects feel a little more background, even though they have an identity, and some are more pronounced. I think creating those contrasts, particularly in modest spaces, creates a dynamic quality and a sense of spaciousness. Clients often have strong feelings about color and I take their ideas into account. It's a dialogue between us, and I can think of a couple cases where I used red, and it organically emerged from the process. I'm interested in the interplay between the different materials and applied color. In one project, Apartment for a Writer, the red felt like a good response to the wood I was using. The interplay between



Eileen Gray: Tempe à Pailla, exhibition, NYIT, 2016 photograph: Annie Schlechter

the white walls, the rich wood, the primary red, and a neutral gray felt satisfying. It's always a process of experimentation. In another project, Pied à Terre, a palette of yellow, red, and teak wood, developed from discussions with the owner and is partly a response to the elements of the city that are visible from that space. The exact shade of a color is something that I spend a lot of time on. There are so many reds, but the right red is a process.



Pied à Terre photograph: Annie Schlechter

A: How has your work evolved over time?

J: I try to retain the intuitive and I've become more confident about my point of view. Of course, over time my frame of reference has expanded as I've been exposed to different cities and cultures and have worked on a larger range of projects. At one point, I worked on an airplane interior; another project was a small museum. I am able to extrapolate the lessons of large-scale or high-budget projects to more modest ones and vice versa.

A: Can you expand a little more on where you draw your inspiration for your work?

J: Even before I chose architecture, I was very sensitive to and very affected by cities and nature and what they offer. I grew up in Canada. During the summer we would spend time at a cabin on a lake. It was quite rustic and simple, with an economy of space and direct exposure to the landscape. It was about a shared space, communal space, making things yourself. And as I got a little older, it became clearer to me that I was very interested in artistic practices, but I never saw myself as a painter or that type of practitioner. To the extent that I knew about it, architecture was something that could combine

an artistic practice with something that was in the world of how people live and work. So growing up in Canada and going to the lake, that was a strong influence. Then later, travel, seeing extraordinary cities and countryside, combined with my education and a family that placed a strong emphasis on learning.

A: How do you decide when you want to take on a project?

J: There are certain requirements for me. I like each project to be meaningful, in some way, to extend my practice and challenge me. I want to experiment, and to evolve and to feel like I can have an impact on the project and achieve a certain level of quality. By quality I mean I endeavor to increase the exposure to light, improve the interplay of spaces, and so on. It's important to be compensated for your work, but I try not to choose projects based on financial compensation. My clients and I have very interesting discussions about architecture, and it's really satisfying to be able to engage with other people's perspectives in a way that broadens my own work.

A: What would you say is the relationship between architecture and nature?

J: I've worked on rural dwellings and structures and I find the relationship between nature and the built environment—mediated through scale, views, spatial design, materials— particularly compelling. I think we should have as much exposure and connection to nature as we can. Of course, in New York or other urban environments, it's not always possible. Not everyone gets a view of the park. Wellbeing can be created through the thoughtful use of scale and proportion. Sometimes scale makes a space relatable by evoking the relationship that we have with nature. I'm not interested in mimicking nature, but where possible, I try to create a dialogue and a connection to nature.

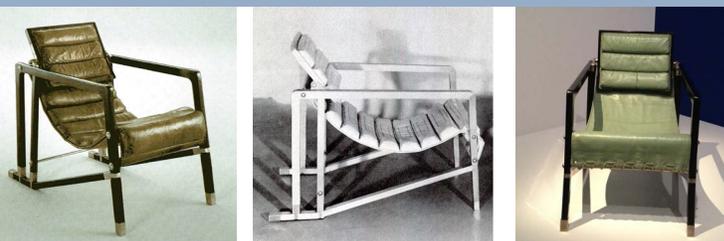
A: How would you say that the field of modern architecture has changed since the start of your career?

J: One thing that comes to mind is that female practitioners have a stronger presence. When I started working for other people, it was fairly common for me to be either the only female or one of two females in a group of mostly

male architects. As a teacher now, most of my classes are at least half female, and now there are many well-known and very successful female practitioners, which has changed in the time that I've been practicing.

A: What is your favorite piece of furniture and why?

J: The Transat Chair by Eileen Gray. There's so much to that chair. Based on transatlantic lounges found on ships of its time, it is a chair that you would use in your own home. It contains the idea of taking a voyage and extending your experience of where you are. Gray made several versions of the Transat Chair in different materials, so the upholstery might be leather, fur, even vinyl. She made them in different colors: there's a green one, a black one, brown, so the palette is really varied. And then in terms of the frame, sometimes they were pale wood and sometimes they were black. The fittings were sometimes brass and sometimes nickel or steel. It's a piece of furniture that has a relationship to the human body, inviting you to lounge in it in a particular way. It has a headrest that pivots, conforming to the user's position, whether reading or lounging. It has a sophistication of detail, like the fittings and the stitching, and it represents ongoing experimentation. I'm very interested in the value of focused work and appreciate the development of an idea over time through deep consideration. The Transat Chair, for Eileen Gray, is an example of that: that she was studying one piece over time and doing different versions of it. I think it's a fantastic and very inspiring piece of furniture.



Eileen Gray Transat Chairs

ABOUT

Allison Mead is a first year undergraduate student at Bryn Mawr College and an alumna of the Bard Graduate Center Lab for Teen Thinkers. She intends on studying math, structural engineering, and architecture. Her favorite styles of architecture are contemporary, tudor, and medieval.

Jan Greben has had an independent architectural practice since 2002, focused on flexibility, the economical use of space, and a personal interpretation of modern principles. Before founding her own studio, Greben worked in four notable architecture firms in New York City: Aldo Rossi Studio di Architettura, Smith-Miller + Hawkinson Architects, Francois de Menil Architect, and Keenen/Riley.

Greben was born in Canada and lives in New York City. She holds a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Toronto and a Master of Science in Advanced Architectural Design from Columbia University. Greben has taught Architecture Studio at the New York Institute of Technology for the past eleven years; developed and taught seminar courses on the architecture of Eileen Gray, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe; and has co-taught Study Abroad programs in France. Greben is working on a forthcoming publication on Eileen Gray. She is a registered architect.