

Q&A with Architect Eran Chen of ODA New York

Eran Chen of ODA New York is spearheading the design of DUMBO's 51 Jay Street. The firm is committed to preserving the past while creating an environment people will want to live in in the future



51 Jay Street.

Eran Chen is the founder and executive director of ODA New York.



Eran Chen. Photo by Peter Hurley.

NYS: When and why did you originally found ODA New York?

Eran Chen: I founded ODA New York in mid-2007. After having lived and worked in NYC for eight years, I felt a deep connection to it, and yet a growing frustration with the typologies of its newest architecture. I felt that the demanding realities of such fast growing cities like NYC had reduced architecture to façade design on ever-growing extruded glass boxes. The resulting decreased connectivity, and lack of authenticity and context has generally diminished the qualities that support people's sense of wellbeing. I felt a strong desire and obligation to test new ideas, so starting my own firm seemed to be the only way to do so.

NYS: What is ODA New York's mission?

EC: We are leading a quiet but unyielding revolution to replace the dogma of resigned and compromised city living with one that enriches our lives and adapts to our needs. We can and must rethink our reliance on the extruded box format, and instead design permeable buildings that will restore our relationship to nature and with one another. Radical changes to the common built environment doctrine is a crucial element in maintaining both our physical and psychological wellbeing.



51 Jay Street.

NYS: We love the DUMBO neighborhood and are excited that you are spearheading the design for 51 Jay Street! What should buyers expect from the proposed 74-home luxury warehouse conversion?

EC: One should think of 51 Jay as a container of historical narratives, much like the past brings pleasure to the present in a bottle of finely aged wine. The building's structure tells stories of it's manufacturing heyday in the early 1800's, when raw materials came in on train tracks and were then shaped with heavy machinery under the natural light pouring in through the skylights, windows and courtyards. We've added our own interpretation by using a palette of materials inspired by what luxury meant in those days, collaged in a contemporary way. The layers of old and new combine to create a totally fresh and original product that could only exist in DUMBO—a living experience that is authentic to and highly expressive of it's location.



51 Jay Street.

NYS: How are you planning on keeping 51 Jay Street in line with the waterfront neighborhoods charm?

EC: DUMBO's charm is nostalgic and abundant all over the neighborhood. What we are planning to bring with 51 Jay is the fusion of the neighborhood's past with the way we believe people will to live in the future.

NYS: What design aspects will reflect the area's rich history?

EC: The building's new lobby used to be the service entrance to the original steel plate factory. A network of steel trollies once ran from the piers through DUMBO's streets, transporting goods to and from these buildings by entering into each. We decided to restore the original steel tracks that wound their way from Jay Street into the heart of the building, and to frame the new lobby as the old train station was. The outcome is not only beautiful but also a symbol of connectivity vital to the life of the neighborhood.

NYS: What has been the biggest hurdle so far in designing 51 Jay Street?

EC: The biggest challenge in adaptive reuse is dealing with old—and sometimes dilapidated—structures, restoring them and bringing them up to code while maintaining their original character. These old buildings, 51 Jay included, are full of surprises and unforeseen mysteries, so construction doesn't always go as planned.

NYS: How will 51 Jay Street keep in line with the design of the other buildings you have worked on in Brooklyn, or will they?



51 Jay Street Rendering.

EC: We're working on several projects of diverse types and scales in Brooklyn, but all share the spirit of community building and placemaking that have become ODA hallmarks. We always strive to identify the unique properties of every given site and exploit them in a fresh and unexpected ways. Our buildings look different because they function differently, and adhere to site-specific circumstances. 51 Jay is a modest yet sincere contribution to a new type of dwelling—one that breaks the paradigm of dead end boxes we call "apartments."

NYS: What projects do you have on the horizon?

EC: In DUMBO, ODA designed 10 Jay Street, a waterfront office complex combining an historic building with a cutting edge 3D façade, which was recently approved by Landmarks. We're also currently working on two of the biggest sites ever developed in Bushwick, as well as a waterfront site on Kent Ave in Williamsburg. In addition, we have also been asked to conceptualize and design some truly transformative buildings in Washington D.C., Atlanta, London, and San Francisco.

NYS: What project would you most like to work on?

EC: I'd like to change the way we look at the built environment so that our buildings are not just conforming contextually or performing technically, but rather making enormous strides towards engaging and connecting us back to nature and one another.

NYS: Which designers or architects have inspired you and why?

EC: I have recently been introduced to [Neri Oxman](#), an American-Israeli architect, designer, and professor at the MIT Media Lab, where she leads the Mediated Matter research group. She is known for art and architecture that combine design, biology, computing, and materials engineering. Her work frames the notion of a shift from nature-inspired design to design-inspired nature.



51 Jay Street.

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