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A Visual Biographer
WID CHAPMAN



| BY HELÈNE RAMACKERS
Images Courtesy of Wid Chapman Architecture

With a familiar lineage of architecture, Wid Chapman was born into the practice of designing for a living. He spoke with *Upscale Living Magazine* about what it takes to be an architect, and what it's like to be a visual biographer.

Wid, tell us about yourself.

I am an architect and a teacher; I lecture part time at Parsons. I set up my own practice over 20 years ago. I have a multi-disciplinary practice with a focus on hospitality.

Did you have an influence in your youth that shaped your career path?

My father and mother were both important influences in my life.

My father was an architect and had a practice in Cambridge, MA, and I spent a lot of time in his office as child. It was a magical experience. I fondly





recall all the smells and textures of mylar, ink, 'pounce', lead pointers, electric erasers; there was so much materiality in the process at that time. The conceptual blended seamlessly with a material process.

My father studied with Walter Gropius at Harvard and my mother with Joseph Albers at Yale - both Bauhaus legends. After school, my father went to work at Gropius's Cambridge firm, The Architects' Collaborative (TAC). My mother ended up there as Gropius's color

consultant, working on wonderful, colorful, large-scale tile murals for public projects. That's where they met.

All of this certainly suggests that design is 'in my blood'. When my older sisters both went to architecture school - both practice today, it really became embedded in the family and yielded unending topics of conversation at the dinner table around the theme of architecture.

Two family trips to Europe in the seventies were profound. My parents took us to several countries with much focus on towns, villages and museums. What an eye-opener to see the world outside of our young American borders for the first time. Today, as a designer, architect, and educator, I'm keenly interested in the notion of figure/ground, positive and negative space. I'm sure it was these trips and learning about ancient European city plans that fostered this, as they're the ultimate expression of figure/ground-time and the accretive, organic growth



of ancient urban settings. I still have a print of the 1704 map of Brixten, Austria, a wonderful Tyrolean city, from that first trip, hanging on my bedroom wall.

When and why did you decide to become an architect?

Initially, I did not have the same design bug that my sisters had. I was interested in painting, writing, and political science, particularly international affairs. So, I spent two years at a small New England college. Then, en route

to a semester in France, the family lore is that I was filling out my Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) transfer application on the way to the airport and checked the box that said “architecture,” which turned out to be binding. By the end of my stay in France, I was trying to decide between architecture at RISD or a poly sci track at the Sorbonne. The rest is history.

When did you start your firm, Wid Chapman?

I started my firm, Wid Chapman Architects

almost 20 years ago; previous to that I was co-founder in a practice with my sister; and during that period, I had a number of years as Chair of Interior Design at Parsons.

Your firm merges architecture and design for hotels, restaurants, residential, retail and student spaces. When it comes to restaurant design, what are the most important factors and considerations?

Restaurants are all unique. They are predominately human stories. It takes passion,



commitment and long hours to make a success of it. All my clients come with a vision for their particular food dreams and desires. They're never just presenting a plate of food, but truly themselves. I become a partner in their vision and seek to bring to life their particular perspective and journey. We do single restaurants and build chains and major brands, but each is the story of the founder, their incredible entrepreneurship and history. Practically speaking, every site is unique, the kitchen and serving dynamics, customer flows, landlord requirements. Hospitality is complex.

What is your process in project approach?

We are like biographers; we seek to immerse ourselves in the founders' stories, their cultures, histories, understand their cuisine, bring the local perspective to the project, and intertwine it into the visuals and aesthetics. Each project is about abstracting the essence of the vision and creating an entire environment that immerses the diner, transporting them into a new world.

How vital is input from the client?

Client input is essential - we are biographers.

If your vision differs from the client, do you try to persuade them to see things your way without coming across as forceful?

Design is an iterative and collaborative process. We seek to manifest the client's vision, and where there is difference in opinion regarding design, the first step is to step back and ensure we fully understand the objection. Generally speaking, clients come to trust their dreams in our hands, they see the reception their restaurants receive and inevitably any concerns melt away very quickly.

Do you have a signature piece that is essential in each of your restaurant designs?

All our restaurants are conceptual abstractions of a client's brief; we incorporate a lot of layers and dimensionality in all our projects, whether it's a 300sqft or 10,000sqft. We constantly look to create multiple dining experiences in a single restaurant.

What was your ultimate goal in achieving each restaurant's look?

Delivering the client's vision is our number one goal.

You've designed some amazing restaurants in NYC, both upscale and casual. Is there a favorite and why?

Each restaurant has a special story and so it's hard to choose! Tamarind is and continues to be one of my favorite restaurants. The town square concept was incredibly successful and has stood the test of time. I love Peachy Keen and it's bold and dynamic and is one of the most inclusive restaurants we have ever designed. Dhamaka and Semma were fantastic journeys; as a biographer I was able to spend many hours with the owners and immerse myself in a wealth of stories and ideas from this innovative partnership.

And the most challenging one?

All projects have challenges, they are usually about the site and the idiosyncrasies of that site.

How do you navigate the demands of this high-pressure environment (hopefully there's a fun aspect too)?

It's a matter of keeping perspective, listening and patience. I bike a lot, I sail, and I practice

yoga; these things keep me sane.

What do your designs reflect?

My designs reflect my owners, I am always abstracting their stories and dreams, we really are visual biographers. Our particular super power is telling visual stories, creating immersive environments and harmonious spaces.

How important is it to design a building that is sustainable?

It's an important aspect, however it's one of many and much of the sustainability road blocks end up being cost. We forget that restaurants are ultimately small operations, we try to re-use, and recycle as much as possible and using sustainable materials more and more.

And for the building to be 'green'?

Green is a massive question in a city like NYC. So much of the infrastructure and building architecture will have to be upgraded; we are involved only in interiors. How and what pace is as much a policy, political decision as a cost decision.

A catchphrase that best describes you.

'Plain sailing'.

Exciting projects on the horizon?

We are currently working on over 20 projects in the office and counting!

Parting thoughts?

Being an architect is a privilege. You are able to give life to your visions in a way that few other disciplines allow. People step into the worlds you create and you get to tell other people's stories alongside your own. Architects are inventors, artists, and engineers. It's a profession that is deeply satisfying and rewarding on so many levels. Our clients become, in many cases, lifelong friends, not just business partners. My parting thought is gratitude for all that I have been able to contribute into the world and for the work to come. ❖

