

Ideas in Design



PHOTO: ROB KULISEK

STUDIO VISIT **Leong Leong**

Architect brothers Dominic (left) and Chris Leong discuss their project for this year's Venice Architecture Biennale and the future of the work space.

INTERVIEW BY DAVE KIM

Your firm is on the Bowery, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Does the neighborhood influence your office culture?

Dominic Leong: The Bowery feeds a lot into the everyday life of the studio. We've designed a couple of galleries in the area, so being here has been really formative. There's a little bit of incubation going on—there are a bunch of creatives in this area, and it's nice just to be around that before rent goes up and we get kicked out.

Chris Leong: Bowery's interesting because it still has a lot of lighting, hardware, and kitchen supply stores. We're always exploring different materials, taking familiar objects and trying to make them foreign. We're constantly looking things up on the Internet and realizing they're right down the street.

Do you have a common agenda in your work? Your projects range from local, very intimate designs as small as a single room to larger international spaces like the flagships you designed for 3.1 Phillip Lim.

Dominic: They're definitely all tied together. I think our ideas are scaleless: We look at doing a small-scale installation with the same kind of rigor that we would do a larger project. There are always seeds of different projects embedded in others.

Chris: For example, the first Phillip Lim projects were almost extensions—or an evolution—of themselves. And when we started to do other installation projects, we redeveloped those ideas and applied them at different scales. We don't try to distinguish types of work. We try to identify constraints and how to exploit those constraints.

You're designing interiors for the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale this year. What's the concept of the exhibit?

Dominic: There are two parts. One is an archive of a thousand projects over the last hundred years of modernism, looking at the U.S. corporate office as a major factor in the dissemination of modernist ideology. And then there's an experimental office for a new form of collaboration between young progressive firms and more corporate firms. It's sort of a think tank, a prototype office.

Chris: A lot of the research is based on not just the projects but also the evolution of these offices. So we're looking at the space of the architectural office as a project in itself. One of the fundamental aspects of our design is a large table. It's a work surface, but it's also about the linking of the exhibition and the workspace. It's a hybrid of a vitrine and a space for collaboration. The outcomes of work will be displayed within the worktable.

What did you learn in your preparation for this project?

Dominic: This was an opportunity for us to look into the culture of work and understand what the future of the architectural office is. A lot of it has to do with technology and the tools we're using: There's this assumption that because things are becoming more digital, the workspace becomes liberated from physical things. But the reality is that these new tools actually allow us to create more stuff. So the office becomes more physical. It becomes an accumulation of more artifacts, more materials, more models, more drawings, and all of a sudden the role of the archive is now very essential to the office. So this table is about these new conditions of work or production. In the context of the exhibition, it becomes a sort of interface between the office and the public.

Chris: How do you make the activity of the office legible? You make the desk itself the object of display.

Has researching cultures of work affected your own?

Chris: We've been talking a little more about sort of letting go and not saying, "This is our specialty, this is what we're going to be working towards." It's a looser kind of focus. We've called it a "fuzziness." It's like these workspaces: You're creating an environment where things can push and pull and take different forms.

Dominic: The other thing we're interested in is the relationship between the cultural sector and the commercial sector, and the increasing blurriness between those two things that results in a lot of positive outcomes—like when you have collaborations between art and fashion. There's also the negative side, the over-blurring. It's so symbiotic at this point. If I were to be a purist, I would say it devalues the cultural. But it's tricky, too, because that sphere gains relevance in becoming more commercial, exposed to a broader audience. Culture becomes more accessible, but it also needs a buffer from becoming too commercial. Our practice is pretty much based on this overlap: We have cultural projects and we have commercial projects. It's a milieu that we're embedded in but also trying to understand.

Are you working on something that explores this idea of overlapping?

Chris: We're collaborating with Charles Renfro on a project for the curatorial practice program at School of Visual Arts. It's a space that's part classroom, part gallery, part social space. It's about creating mobile walls that mimic the tabs and knobs on a mixing board. The walls move and rotate to allow the space to mix or be divided into different functions.

Dominic: Art and exhibition space has no set format anymore. Art can be anything from a painting to a website, and exhibition space can be any kind of format, too. In this academic environment at SVA, the space becomes a protagonist, so it can move around, it can be reconfigured, it can become social. It can become this giant mixer of all these different formats for art and curation.

How has growing up together as brothers shaped your professional relationship?

Chris: It's funny, I was just at home and got a chance to look at a lot of old images. We're always together within the frame. We're always kind of adjacent to each other.

Dominic: Nothing's changed.

Chris: The thing about being partners and being brothers—and it goes back to always being in the same environment and exploring things together—is that there's a level of trust. We don't always have the same ideas, but that level of familiarity and trust really allows for exploration.

What's an ideal workday for you?

Dominic: No meetings.

Chris: [Laughs] No meetings.

Dominic: That sounds bad though, like we don't want to talk to people.

Chris: But I think that's the hardest thing, creating that space, that vacuum where you can just think about what it is you're doing. It's also the challenge of the practice: to create space that has meaning, that has value. That's what separates architecture from buildings.

Dominic: It's the idea that you're totally embedded in the world, but at the same time totally removed from it to have the critical distance to figure out how you're engaging the world. So you're constantly going back and forth between complete immersion and trying to isolate yourself. In New York, you have to survive, you have to be in the marketplace. But how do you operate within that and maintain your autonomy and objectivity? How do you look inside and outside at the same time?