

BlackBook

Industry Insiders: Glen Coben, Design-Addicted

By **Marcy MacDonald** December 10, 2009



Glen Coben is the president of Glen and Company, specializing in architecture branding design. He's had a hand in Bistro Chat Noir, Del Posto, Esca, the Neptune Room, Noodle Bar, and Zucca. Coben describes himself as an architect and designer with an intense love of creating spaces; his current projects include the new Wyndham hotel, Fashion 26, The Edison Ballroom, a complete renovation of the Old Homestead, Bar Luna, and 57 restaurant and club in Tokyo.

How would you describe yourself?

My life varies between being in the office and working with my incredible team of architects and designers on great projects. I'm meeting with clients, contractors, artists. The industry is about relationships that form the foundation of what we do. What I do is the ability to tell stories through design.

Upcoming projects?

Miguel Sanchez Romera's Barcelona-based L'Esguard has one Michelin star, and I'm designing his first restaurant outside Barcelona. It will be called MSR New York. I've spent the last 18 months working with him, and we've unveiled what the restaurant is going to look like. Fashion 26 at the Wyndham is what brought us together. I was originally hired to design the restaurant, and then we were hired out to do the lobby and public spaces, and then the guest rooms. The great thing about the project is their corporate guidelines; they're wonderfully fashioned and put together, not quite like a menu, but it talks about expectation of quality. When we first sat down, we were encouraged to follow the guidelines of quality, but to also strive for innovation specific to the location, or site-specific design.

And how was working on Fashion 26?

In making brand values local to space, Fashion 26 will speak value-for-money integrated with understated luxury in the Garment District. Those were our talking points as far as designing this particular Wyndham Hotel: value for less money. We used a lot of references to "weaving" things together with plaids and pinstripes to create custom wall coverings and treatments. The front desk is an old cutting-room table with cast iron legs. We've created a fashion stew.

Some of your favorite projects?

I was the store designer for NIKE and NIKETOWN, which has a global brand presence.

How did you start out?

I went to Cornell School of Architecture and learned that architects come in lots of different shapes and sizes. From there, I went to a collaborative organization for artists and architects called SITE for Sculpture in the Environment, and my first mentor was an artist called James Wines, an icon of the early 70s and 80s. From there, I was a principal at Rockwell Group, where my role was to head up the fairly large studio, and I worked on very diverse projects, such as the Kodak Theatre for the Academy Awards. I was working with Michael Ovitz to bring football back to Los Angeles. I was also in charge of the Mall at Jersey Garden. The diversity of work there inspired me to go out on my own and create a diversified practice.

What are your go-to places?

The original Wild Ginger in Seattle. You remember the first time you ever taste the Seven Flavor Beef. I also like La Esquina, Corton, Dovetail, the front room at Gramercy Tavern, the Bouqueria in Barcelona and Amandari Hotel in Bali.

Who are your mentors?

I admire David Rockwell as an innovator, a hospitality designer, and as a friend.

What is architecture focused on right now?

Comfort. I see that we're going towards a time where guests are looking for comfort as well as style and accessibility.

Anything that annoys you?

Molecular gastronomy. I don't truly understand the term. I understand that it's innovation in terms of technique, but the need for a label to talk about something that is either new or avant garde puts people into a cubbyhole that's too limited for some who are doing amazing things that are not molecular by nature. The term bothers me.