THE MAYNE IDEA

Since founding Morphosis almost forty years ago, Thom Mayne is producing work that is more relevant than ever. His iconic designs have earned him membership to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Pritzker Prize, more than 100 AIA awards (most recently, four 2010 AIA/LA Design Awards) and commissions all over the world. Publisher Ann Gray sits down with the architect to find out what inspires his dynamic practice.

Do you have an overarching source of inspiration or does each project have its own inspiration?

I think inspiration starts with some sort of a desire to change things. My sense is it's in your DNA. Certain people look at the world and are more or less in agreement with the way things are. Other people look at the world and say, "I see problems." That sets up desires, and all action begins with desire. I can remember being an architecture student when somewhere it became understood that my role was to define my generation and somehow advance things.

So you actually perceived a generational shift with your schooling?

Oh, huge! It was the '60s. A series of things were happening that were just amazingly powerful. I was in the Vietnam generation. Civil rights, Kennedy—it was a time of huge optimism in

terms of the potential of change, which came from inspiration. You can still listen to Martin Luther King's famous speech and have it bring tears to your eyes. Within architecture itself there was an exhausting of the modern project, so there was already a discussion of what was going to take place next. Outside of architecture, there was film. I grew up with Truffaut and Fellini and Godard, an amazing group, which probably had as much affect on me as stuff within the discipline.

So an overarching social component inspired creativity?

The world was changing and we, the public, could make that change. And we, the students at the university, could affect that. But going back to inspiration, I think it comes from observing the world. It becomes the material of your ideas.

So it's assimilating the input, be it creative or experiential.

Architecture is so broad; it deals with everything. So it could be reading *Seeing is Forgetting*, by Robert Irwin. It could come from the art world itself. It could be through observation of a particular work, like Heizer's *Double Negative*, or visiting a work that completely alters the way you think you know architecture. It's your visual literacy.

Over time, you're assimilating things that you might have experienced not just last week but also 30 years ago. Have you seen a change in your inspiration over time?

The time framework is quite complicated. It doesn't quite matter if it was seen an instant ago or twenty years ago. Ideas, the gestation, take many, many years, sometimes decades. You also accumulate baggage, and I think

When designing projects, architect Thom Mayne (left) looks to the program first. "I don't allow myself to think about solutions until I have a piece of work," he says. ABOVE: A sketch of the Cahill Center for Astronomy and Astrophysics at Caltech.
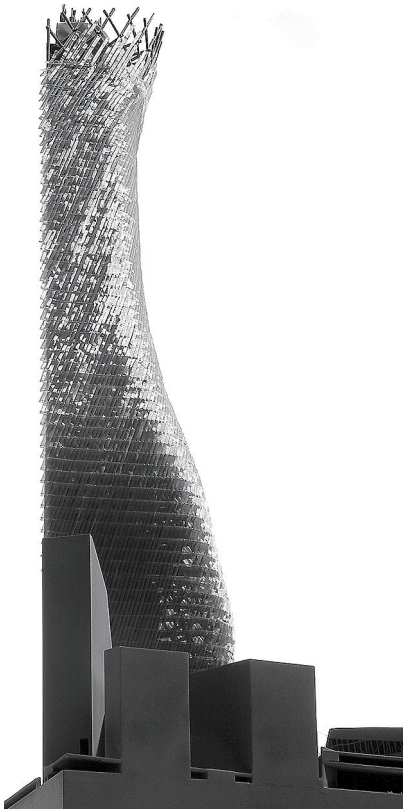
> "Architecture is so pragmatic, and you get involved with all of the day-to-day. I thought it was time to start freeing myself from the constraints and start looking at the conceptual directions."

that's a problem. As you get older, you your-self produce work and that work becomes a source for future work. It's a problem because now your own experience, your own knowledge base, is potentially hazardous territory, and it's going to drag you down. It's going to impede the type of creativity that looks at something from a much more naïve position where anything is possible.

Is the baggage a tendency to repeat something that worked before? Or is it a tendency to work toward expectations that have been laid down over the years?
Both. We're all habitual creatures. You become comfortable with certain things. It comes out of a success that you've been rewarded for being successful in certain aspects of your work. It's definitely something to be cautious about.

You have to remember that what got you to that level of success is not necessarily the buildings, but the way you approached every single project.
Exactly. In professional terms, inspiration connected to a particular endeavor—archi-tecture—requires an understanding of an operational strategy. Meaning you understand the nature of your own creations and the procedures that got you there.

How do you keep your approach fresh now?
I've got some paintings that I started doing after fifteen years of producing architecture and kind of stopping the "secondary" stuff. It's absolutely about wanting to rethink and rechallenge basic principals of what I'm involved in.

Is painting something you've just taken up?
Up until about 1995 I'd always produced a lot of drawings, artifacts, objects, furniture, etc. As I got really busy in the mid-'90s I kind of stopped doing that. Architecture is so pragmatic, and you get involved with all of the day-to-day. I thought it was time to start freeing myself from the constraints and start looking at the conceptual directions. What was I doing twenty years ago that was useful? That was it. It was incredibly impor-tant, and it actually defined the office. The studio was known as a place that dealt in ideas and wasn't limited by the huge contin-gent factor of architecture.

Frequently, architects like to draw for fun, but even their non-architectural drawings become very literally translated into their architectural work. What conceptual level are you operating on?
I'm interested in organizational structure, which is leading to ideas that will definitely have to do with architecture, but not in any literal way. If you look at them, they are not architectural works. They're within the realm of sculpture, painting, whatever you want to call them. For me, it'd have to operate on an abstract level if I'm doing them for myself. And I'm not doing them for anyone else. I'm doing them because it gives me a huge release. As the projects get larger they get much more cumbersome, and much more difficult in every sense, certainly emotionally. These allow me a bit of freedom. ■

To see a video of the full interview and Thom Mayne's paintings, visit formmag.net.

TOP AND ABOVE: "Technology totally changed our profession," says Mayne. "The Phare Tower in Paris would not be possible without a digital environment." OPPOSITE TOP: The relationship of living space to academic components set up Mayne's approach to the Emerson College Los Angeles Center. OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT AND LEFT: Morphosis's competition design for a new U.S. embassy in London would redefine the city's skyline. An interior bridge would appear to float in the transparent, light-filled space.

The original article was published in the January/February 2011 issue of FORM.