

Big Town **Big Dreams**

Stories about immigrant New Yorkers who make this town the great place it is

Down-to-earth designer of towers in the sky

Architect Ismael Leyva's stamp is on some of the city's swankiest residential buildings, including the Time Warner Center and Astor Place in Manhattan.

But it is the Windsor at Forest Hills, Queens, an Art Deco-style apartment tower and retail center, that makes the 55-year-old Mexican designer beam.

"It was very satisfying," says Leyva of the borough's first new condo project in a decade. "It was a building that was well-received by the community."

Known for his use of dramatic angles, glass to heighten views and high-end extras such as hot tubs and home theaters, Leyva still takes great pride in having helped improve the quality of life in Forest Hills.

It's this down-to-earth attitude and work ethic that stand out in the world of luxury real estate - and help win him commissions.

"We hired him because he's a fantastic person," says Jay Eisenstadt, founder of Esplanade Capital, the developer of a striking triangular glassy building in downtown Brooklyn that Leyva recently designed.

"He's not egotistical, and he's

very hands-on. Although he's running a very big shop, he comes to every meeting."

The Veracruz native got his bachelor's degree in architecture at the University of Veracruz in Xalapa. At age 25, after designing a hotel in Acapulco, Mexico, for a friend of his father, a barber, he decided to make the move to New York - "the place for an architect interested in high-rise buildings."

But his Mexican degree and experience were nearly worthless here. He discovered he'd need to work for three years with a registered architect before he could even take the test to get licensed.

"It was difficult being recognized as an architect in your country and being demoted to draftsman - to start from no-

where," says Leyva.

He found an apartment in Ridgewood, Queens, and a job in Hoboken, N.J., as a draftsman. But before long, he landed a better draftsman's job, one with upward mobility, at the now-defunct Philip Birnbaum & Associates, a firm specializing in upscale apartment towers.

He rose quickly to project manager and senior designer, then decid-



ing after 15 years with the firm that it was time to strike out on his own.

In 1996, he started Ismael Leyva Architects, renting "a corner" in a friend's Union Square office. "For a year, I worked for myself, just me and the computer," Leyva says.

Then came his first big break, a commission to design the interior of the Chatham at 65th St. and Third Ave., followed by the Time Warner Center job.

Those apartments - which won rave reviews in 2004 for their sleek, modern look - first thrust him into the public eye. One Time Warner unit reportedly sold for \$27 million early this year.

"He is so talented and has such an in-depth knowledge of high-rise residential buildings," says David Wine, president of The Related Cos., which signed Leyva for both projects.

They allowed him to move to an office on W. 38th St. with a staff of about 15 a year after he had gone solo. In 2000, he upgraded again, to his current spacious offices on W.37th St. In December, the 105-architect firm celebrated its 10th anniversary.

This year, Leyva, his wife - documentary maker Carol Ciancutti-Leyva - and their three young children moved into a spacious condominium on Central Park West. True to Leyva's aesthetic, the 15th-floor apartment has floor-to-ceiling windows

and sweeping views.

The firm's upcoming projects include public facilities, such as the interior of Manhattan's James A. Farley General Post Office, and even affordable housing.

The firm is working with Frank Gehry, the legendary architect of Brooklyn's Atlantic Yards, on the interior design for 14 buildings that will include affordable units. But it remains the luxury high-rises for which Leyva is best known.

"I like to play with angular shapes," says the lean, dark architect, sitting at his desk surrounded by miniatures of his work. "The tops of my buildings are usually angular, even the shape of the building itself."

Construction is underway on a wedgelike 43-story glass residential tower at Eighth Ave. and 48th St. that Leyva designed. At 22 feet wide, the site called for creative space-saving solutions - one of Leyva's specialties.

"We cantilevered the building 7 feet over the neighboring property because we had the air rights," he says. "So we increased the footprint to make the floor plan more efficient."

Construction on the 21-story triangular downtown Brooklyn building, also glass, will start next month at 85 Flatbush Ave. Extension.

"Most of these buildings we're working on have very good views," Leyva says. "We're trying to maximize the amount of glass in living areas."

"We bring glass from floor to ceiling because the views are spectacular, and that's what people like."

In January, Leyva received an Excellence in Design award from the Queens Chamber of Commerce for the Windsor, built in 2005 on Queens Blvd. at 71st Road.

He was particularly gratified by the recognition, he says, because "with most new developments, you find resistance. There are some neighborhoods where they prefer no changes."

Downtown Brooklyn may be one of them. Leyva's building "will definitely stand out, in a disconcerting way," says Simeon Bankoff, executive director of the preservation group Historic Districts Council.

Yet some publications have drawn comparisons between Leyva's design and Manhattan's iconic Flatiron Building.

"It's an unbelievable building, a beautiful building," Leyva says of the Flatiron. "It's a compliment, absolutely."

Do you know an immigrant New Yorker who achieved his or dream in our great city? E-mail Maite Junco at Big-Town@nydailynews.com