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uilding a Legacy

The Old Testament tells the story of Ismael, who was cast out by his father Abraham, only later to fall into God's favor and become the leader of his own nation. While the New York architect Ismael Leyva has his own fascinating story – though not quite as harsh – his journey from a stranger in a strange land to a pillar of societal influence somewhat echoes that of his Biblical namesake.

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The president of Ismael Leyva Architects, today the affable *veracruzano* works on world-class projects like Manhattan's Time Warner Center and brainstorms with architectural legends like Frank Gehry. But his career in the U.S. began with a limited English vocabulary and a rented apartment in Queens, New York.

Long before he owned a home on that iconic Manhattan concourse, Riverside Drive, Ismael Leyva was a curious, artistic child in Veracruz, Mexico. "Since a very young age, I like painting and sculpture. I used to draw a lot and knew that it was possibility to design, create and draw profession. "After receiving a bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Veracruz, Leyva landed a job designing a luxury resort in Acapulco. Then he looked north. "Manhattan is a tough city but I knew it was the place to be as an architect."

Leyva's climb to notoriety in the United States was not as smooth as his early success in Mexico. "My first job was in Hoboken, New Jersey. I lived in Queens and had an hour-and-a half commute every day." Adding to the daily grind, Leyva's Mexican architectural license was not accepted in his new country. "I had to work for three years and then take a test to get my license in the United States. I had to go back to being a draftsman after having been an architect in Mexico."

"When I came to New York, I hardly spoke English. It was especially difficult because I needed to know the terminology for architecture. I knew that had to be better and better to really be successful. So I worked very hard."

For years, Leyva worked seven a week, slowly building to the current height of his success. "I got a job in New York with Philip Birnbaum & Associates, where I was fortunate to be promoted fast. I stayed there for 15 years. After a while, I thought I could do better by myself. It's funny because, essentially, I just quit! I rented a corner in my friend's office for \$500 a

month."

From that corner, Leyva built his own firm, Ismael Leyva Architects (ILA), which has 55 employees to date, but began with only one. "For a year, I did small work all by my self. Then, I got hired by the Related Companies to design a 42-story building: The *Chatham* on 55th Street and Third Avenue. I did all the production of the construction documents and from there on things were good."

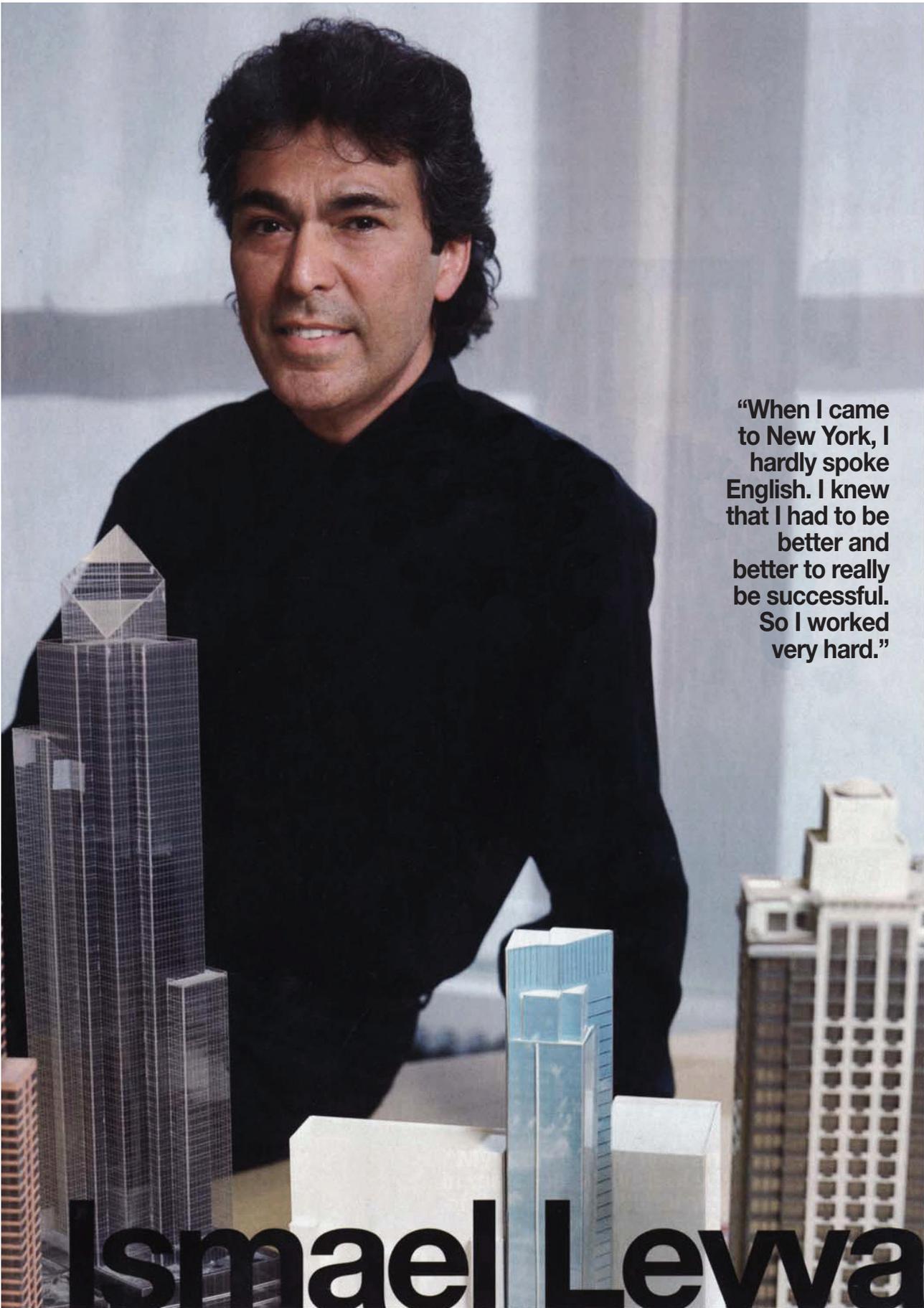
Good indeed. One of his best-known projects is the residential component of the new Time Warner Center in Manhattan. Another Related Companies project, *One Central Park Condominiums* has been the toast of the town since its grand opening last February. (It has been rumored that the condos range in price from \$1.5 million to \$36 million. One 12,500-square-foot penthouse on floors 76 and 77 was reported sold for \$45 million to a London financier.)

"I don't have a style of architecture," Leyva admits when asked about his stamp of originality. "I don't believe that architects should have a style. You respond to the needs or the requirements. You have to adapt to what is necessary, depending on the type of building, who they are the type of users."

The "users" at One Central Park maybe some of the wealthiest in the world, but Leyva build everything from luxury penthouses to low-income housing. ILA is in the early stages of constructing 14 buildings around the new Nets Stadium in Brooklyn. Working as associate architects with Frank Gehry-world renowned for the Guggenheim Bilbao, among others-ILA is building the residential portion of the \$2.5 billion project.

Does he ever have time to bask in the glory of his hard work? The balance of personal life and work life is very difficult," Leyva laughs. "I put a lot of hours into this business free so I can get to my house in upstate New York." **LL**





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