

COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

Ismael Leyva

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The 30-Minute Interview

By VIVIAN MARINO



Mr. Leyva, 62, is the president and founder of Ismael Leyva Architects, a New York firm whose projects worldwide have included the design of the residences at Time Warner Center. He is designing the interiors of two apartment buildings in Hudson Yards.

Before starting his own company in 1996, Mr. Leyva worked for the architect Costas Kondylis.

Interview conducted and condensed by
VIVIAN MARINO

Q. Are you a hands-on owner?

A. Absolutely. I am very much involved in the design aspect of all the projects. I give them the concept — usually I do it by hand, because that was the way I was trained — and then from there it's passed to the managers, and they start producing drawings.

Q. How is business?

A. Business, knock on wood, is very, very good. We have about 19 projects.

Q. Are most of them in the New York area?

A. Most of them. We also do work in Mexico, South America and in Costa Rica, and there we have three projects under construction.

Q. You're working on a few projects with the Related Companies.

A. We're working on five projects with Related. We're working on the first two residential towers on Hudson Yards: Tower D and Tower E. One we're working with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and the other with Diller Scofidio & Renfro. They're doing the exterior, and then we are doing everything else: the interiors and the design of the apartments.

Q. What will those apartments look like?

A. Well, we're working on it now. We're at the very preliminary stages. All I can tell you is that they are large apartments. One design will probably be done in three or four months; and the other we just started.

Q. Among the other interior projects is Liberty Towers in Jersey City.

A. Yeah, that is an interior design at the two towers. We were commissioned to redesign all the interiors and the public areas. It's under construction.

Q. I know that the Boca del Rio project in Veracruz, Mexico, is special to you.

A. Yes. After so many years I had an opportunity finally to do something in my hometown. That is a project that is more like urban planning than anything else. It's an existing boulevard — in the heart of the city in

the edge of the beach, and it's a place that's used to jog and walk. So what we're doing is converting it into a park, which will have bicycle and jogging paths, and we created some areas for cafes and restaurants and fountains. It's a very organic type of design. It's five kilometers long. We finished the preliminary concept. It was approved, and now they're trying to see how much it's going to cost for construction. Before the end of the year they want to start construction.

Q. You were born in Mexico. I understand that you came to New York for your first wife.

A. She was from New York, yeah. I came to visit, and I never went back. New York is probably the place where every architect would like to be. So for me to contribute to this city and to the skyline of New York is my dream.

Q. You spent many years working with the architect Costas Kondylis. Why did you leave?

A. I prefer not to talk about it. It was great for 12 years, but ...

Q. Do you have a favorite project?

A. All my projects are special to me. But there's one particular job project that is very special because it was very challenging. That was the building at 48th and Eighth: the Icon. It's a building that has only 24 feet in width, and we went 43 stories, so you can imagine the challenge to design a building like that. It's one of the most slender buildings in the world. Most people said it wasn't going to work, but it worked. We cantilevered over the property next door because we had the air rights, and so we increased the footprint a little bit, and that makes the building work.

Q. Were you always interested in architecture?

A. At a very early age, yes. I used to draw very well and then paint when I was very young. I was going to go to an artist school, but being a painter was not a good way to make a living. So I looked for some way to still be in the art world and maybe make some good earnings. I found architecture when I was about 15 years old.

Q. Do you still paint?

A. Unfortunately no, because I've been so busy with architecture, and you don't have time for anything else. But I would like to start doing it again. Maybe when I retire.

Q. You guys typically don't retire.

A. That's true.