

ByDESIGN

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Professional Profile Interview

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Why did you choose UC Berkeley?

I grew up in East Los Angeles. I was very sheltered. I was pretty ignorant and my college counselor recommended I apply there. I asked them where it was, and he said it was a little bit past Magic Mountain and I gave it a shot. I applied to other local schools too like USC and UCLA, Cal Poly Pomona. Berkeley seemed fine with me. So it was out of sheer ignorance, and that's the truth.

How was your experience or first impressions when you first entered UC Berkeley?

My first impression was that I was culture shocked. No body looked like me; I had never really been outside of the LA area. I visited family in Mexico but that was the extent of my travelling. So when I showed up on campus, it was an extreme shock. But I think that somehow I just got it - there was very little time to be afraid or to be noticed, I just kind of sat down, my parents dropped me off and said good bye and took off (laughs) so I had to be a quick thinker really fast. It was definitely a challenge. The first semester was very rough, but shortly after it became a breeze. I was good at what I was studying, I met a lot of friends, I met a few people from LA that shared the same initial impact that I had felt. And that way it was made a little bit smoother.

What sparked your interest in architecture and design?

I have been creative since I can remember. I remember not being allowed to play - I was a little bit on the dangerous side and my mother kept me in doors a lot. So it was either watching TV, playing with toys or drawing. I remember drawing as a little boy. I went to high school and continued drawing. I would stay indoors during lunch drawing on teachers chalkboards, they let me. I would bring in colored chalk. Drawing and the creative process were always involved; and again the suggestion of the college counselor

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said that maybe I should study architecture at Berkeley. My parents - god bless them, didn't know how to counsel me. My dad was a retired truck driver, my mom is a teacher's aid; they didn't really say "oh mijo you can do this you can do that," so I just sort of showed up on campus blindly - not blindly, I didn't know what an architect did. I just kind of showed up and said "lets give this a shot." And it worked out. I was good at it. I graduated with a very high GPA, I got into Graduate School, and I have two Masters Degrees and I'm a professor in architecture. I'm pretty happy that life worked out the way it did.

What aspect of architecture do you enjoy most?

I enjoy the creative aspect of it. I think the drawing, the design, coming up with creative solutions to problems. I designed a couple houses, I designed the first -probably only HIV Clinic in East LA, and I think this is just the beginning. Any architectural problem is exciting for me.

How do you think CASA / UC Berkeley aided your career or prepared you for the architecture / design world?

I do know that without CASA I would have had a terrible time at Berkeley. One of the best things that I remember about CASA is that there were Freshman, Sophomores, Juniors, Seniors, Graduates students. And when you don't understand something, and your classmate doesn't understand something - then you can go to the seniors or graduate students, and they have a little bit more perspective on architecture and life in general. That really helped, that sense of community. I remember very much relying on my fellow CASA members to get materials, to get advice to how I can make this model better, to what material I can use for that model. I think the mentorship was valuable to me.

Has that experience contributed to how you run your business?

I got into the teaching business because I love the mentorship aspect of it, young minds, and shaping them intellectually. I think it's really a carry-over from CASA. I don't know if I would have been interested in teaching had I not seen the mentorship that I was seeing close-up. I think it's very related to what I'm doing right now.

What surprised you about architecture / design that Berkeley did not prepare you for or address?

The typical answer is going to be the business aspect of it, but I actually took some business classes at Berkeley and Construction Law class at the business school next door. I actually felt pretty well prepared. I ended up getting an internship in my second year or third year in San Francisco. So by the time I graduated from Berkeley, I knew what architecture was about. When I got my graduate degree I knew I needed to learn a few more things, so I worked for a few firms and once I finished I was able to start my own studio.

How did you start your own firm? What did it take to get to where you are now?

I'm a micro-firm, it's just me, and I'm very happy about it. I do painting, I do design, I've got my own building. I do not pretend to be a firm; however I think that's what I envisioned back when I was in CASA, in Berkeley. I knew I wanted to work for myself. I knew I wanted to be able to be flexible in the projects that I approached. Right now I'm doing a mural in North Hollywood; I'm in negotiations with a gallery owner to do a gallery in Glendale as a design. I'm pretty excited that I can have a variety of projects. I have done graphic design for Univision. I have done graphic Design for Harvard. I am pretty excited about that.

What has been your most memorable project?

There are some projects that you learn a lot from, for example I was the project manager for San Reno High School. It was a 4 million dollar project and it just opened my eyes to the possibilities to the construction and all aspects of architecture. This is when I was working at a firm in Glendale, so that one taught me a lot. But I also know that I look forward to the next project. I have a little bit of a hungry side and I want to do some more work, more design, more shows. So I look forward to the future.

Have there been any obstacles you've needed to overcome in your professional career?

Every job is going to have its issues, and some are more political than others. I think that overall, I am happy to say that no matter what happens in life, I always land on my feet. I have the belief that I have three degrees from Berkeley, and I can do whatever I want. No matter how big the odds are, I can always overcome them. So I'm pretty excited about that.

Considering that you've been in the field for such a long time, how has your perspective on the field changed throughout your career?

Ever since I graduated, my last degree came in at 1997, so I guess you could say it was a long time ago. It has always changed, from year to year. I got out of school when AutoCAD first started taking off and all the firms went from being analog to digital, and I think it has never stopped changing. Everybody is digitized, then came in sustainable technologies, and firms are re-tooling. So I think that in architecture, the only constant is change; people that understand that, they're doing to do okay.

I don't know that you can call my practice an architectural practice because I'll do murals, public art, graphic design and a two story house in San Pedro or in Downy – for me, it's the same. For me, it's not like "I have to put on this hat, I have to put on that hat." For me, it's the creative process. I believe that that has to do with how the profession has changed from a year-to-year basis. It's allowed me to open my eyes for the possibilities of what architecture can do.

Do you see a bright future for the field of design / architecture?

I do. I think people will always need creative vision to help them move forward. I think this world will constantly change, and so therefore I think that there is room for architects, room for creative people for years and years to come. The recession has really done a number on architecture, but I think - allot of my friends who are Cal graduates, they bounce back quickly because Cal has prepared us for a challenging world. They don't necessarily teach you how to be an architect; they teach you how to be a thinker. I think that's been one of the qualities that I appreciate most about the university that I don't have to be what people say I have to be. I can be whatever I wanted to be.

What advice would you give to graduates today versus the challenges you faced when you graduated?

Keep your chin up. It's a rough economic climate, but I 100% believe the tide will turn. I think that once the politicians get their issues in order, which could be in a couple years. Like I said, people need places to live, humans need places to work, humans need places to go. I think that I'm a fan of humanity, and therefore, "hang in there" is my advice. I have been out of school since 1997, and I've had a pretty good year this year. I am excited for next year. I don't know what next year brings, especially when you're self-employed. Sometimes there are good years, sometimes there are bad years. I do not regret the path that I've taken, and I'm very happy to tell you that I'm doing exactly what I've wanted to do.

Can you explain your how your Master of Visual Studies has aided you in your career?

When I was an undergrad in Wurster Hall, it was right across from Krober Hall. I would see all these kids come out with cool drawings and I said "wow! I can do that, I want to do that." So I started taking classes there, one at a time. I actually happened to be a good high school student, I took a lot of AP classes which aligned with some of my electives, and I was able to take a lot of drawing classes at Krober. Over the years, as I was getting my Masters, I started taking advanced drawing classes. It was a natural fit for me. I remember teaching a mural class while I was a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) at UC Berkeley. Like I said earlier, I don't see a difference in design, drawing, painting or graphic design. It's the creative process that's involved, and I see myself as a creative individual. All the shows and the art, it's a natural fit.

What have you learned from teaching at the three different universities?

For whatever reason I teach first year and second year, and that really has helped me- First of all I need to know what I'm talking about so I need to understand what I'm communicating to my students. Believe it or not, they have actually helped me love learning. I think that the learning process is very exciting. I still go to museum shows as often as I can, I go see lectures at UCLA and USC. I don't have to go to them. They say I'm done, stick a fork in me, but that's not how I see it. The students' eyes light up when

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they see information, new buildings that I show them. I think it's very encouraging – I am very inspired by my students. In my studio you'll see books everywhere, it's actually a mess. My wife hates having to work in my studio because it's a mess. But I see it more as a laboratory for learning. I've got magazines everywhere, books, and clippings here and there. And that, I think is very inspiring. I am very inspired by my students. Let me elaborate really quickly: I've been teaching probably for about ten years. I have students that now have PHD's and Masters from Colombia. That excites me; they're really just top-notch kids. That energy, drive, and dedication feeds back to me as well.

What was your experience teaching at UC Berkeley?

I was a GSI, and I taught first year drawing. I did it for two years, and that's where I got my start and my confidence because I was able to teach under Debowsky, Slusky, and Chet Sullivan and all the instructors that were teaching that class. I knew that once I left the bay area, I knew I could do it. I applied and very quickly got some teaching opportunities and here I am. Cal, I love the people there, I love my education there. I have a lot of confidence when I go up to people, and I know that I can mix it up with the best of them.

What are your thoughts on the future of CASA, and do you plan on playing a role?

I am a big fan of helping whenever I can and contributing. I contribute to my old high school, I contribute to scholarships at East LA College, I give to the Graduate Division at Berkeley, I give to the CED. I wish I were a millionaire so I could give a lot of money, but I'm not a millionaire. I run out of a small office, I run a micro-office, a nano-office if you will. So I contribute when I can, and I do feel it's very important to contribute if possible.

CASA in particular is near and dear to my heart, I was the President of CASA for a number of years when I was a student - I was co-chair. I really did see the mentorship and the need that was there. Without CASA, I would have a terrible time at Berkeley. The familiarity was really helpful to me, and I know there are some people that don't need that, but I think when you've come out of East LA and haven't travelled much, Berkeley can be shocking. The Bay Area is a wonderful place and it's huge: When you're out of East LA, and there is no subway back there, and you go to the bay area and you see a subway, it's just a very different animal. But going back to contributing to CASA, I've always done so and I do meet up with some people and they don't give back to their schools and I kind of wonder why. I'll tell you this much, I've benefited a lot when I was growing up and going to school. I got the Alumni scholarship; I got the New House Foundation scholarship - I think it was a Jewish organization. I'm not Jewish, I just wrote and letter and said "hey man I need some help" and then they gave me a check. I know from experience that people out there could use a helping hand. And like I mentioned, I am in a comfortable position at the moment and I am able to help and I'm glad to do so.

What does your design studio specialize in?

I'm doing a whole bunch of stuff. I consider myself as an artist. Right now I am looking at public art. I understand how to read buildings, construction documents, I understand how to read architectural plans. I'm a finalist for a mural at LAX and I also got awarded a mural in North Hollywood, I'm going after a bunch of those projects. If there is a focus, it would be that. Architecture, to be honest with you, has dried up just due to economic factors. So I am very happy to have diverse interests and the ability to push forward. I would say public art is my main interest, but I really like painting and doing studio art as well. That's where my focus would be right now, studio art and public art.

What are your plans for the future?

I am not embarrassed to tell you that I am forty and I'm very happy to tell you that I'm able to do what I wanted to do, and I want to continue that. I want to be able to. I don't know if you know the band Pearl Jam, but I just saw a documentary, and they are a band that writes whatever songs that they want. They've been doing it for twenty years and they're really inspirational to me. I don't want to be stuck in one rut. I don't want to be known as the guy who does this and that's all that he does. I think that in art world, I've been told that my art is too diverse, and in the architecture world, I've been told that my projects are too diverse. But I actually think that they are pigeon-holding themselves. Nobody can predict 10 or 20 years from now, but my goal is to continue doing what I want to do in the creative field. I am a fortunate man to be able to do so up until now, and if I am granted the opportunity to continue my efforts for the next 10 or 20 years. I always tell people that I'm never going to retire; I'm just going to die one day. I'll hopefully be 80 years old with a paintbrush and just keel over. There's no retirement in sight for me. It is because that I love what I'm doing. My wife will say "oh I'm going to the spa today so you have a free day" and I go to the studio, this is what I like doing. This is what I was put on earth to do. I am very excited to have found it.

Do you think the one-sided viewpoint of the design/art / architecture world should change? In your opinion can it change?

I think it has to change. The galleries that only show one type of art, they have to change unless they're not going to survive. The architecture firms that only specialize in one type of architecture, they have to change because of the economic factors. I am actually kind of benefiting from my early adoption of having multiple interests. I think that when my architecture projects dried up a little bit, my painting took off; when my painting dried up a little bit, my public art took off. So there are different values and different highs in doing this. I'm able to sustain a pretty level playing field just because of my varied interests. Diversity for me has always been a big thing. I love diversity of my Chicano roots and my Chicano nature in that I can: I love Jose Jimenez, I love Metallica, I love Suicidal Tendencies... You can't pigeon hold me and I think that you can try - I have a ten year old son and his favorite food is sushi. Most kids would tell you "I like pizza, hamburgers", no my little guy likes eel. That's his favorite food. For me, that's diverse. I go back to

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Berkeley, they pretty much opened my eyes to the world; I had friends from Australia, New Zealand, England, Oakland. So I really have to credit the diversity at Berkeley.