

INSIDE MY OFFICE: *Architect Alessandro Orsini*

Speaking with a noticeable Italian accent, Alessandro Orsini makes his one guiding principle crystal clear: architecture is design and design is architecture. The principal of Archi[te]nsions discusses design from his 45th-floor office in New York's Empire State Building.

By Noah Davis
Photos by Eric Luc

On...Tactility

"We knew we wanted to do something inflatable, and we knew we wanted to create something with a pattern, and that the pattern needed to contain an element of protection from the rain. We came across this very simple packaging material—if I'm being honest, I think the paper was packing for fruit, or came with something from Crate and Barrel. It's just a flat piece of paper, but it's cut in a way that it's an expanding mesh, and it reacts in a different way. We applied the same concept to the Dreams Pavilion; the rigidity of the structure comes from the hexagon, which is a geometric figure that is very stable. Sometimes the starting idea of a project is just a simple thing."

On...Materials

"I learned to be very attentive to materials. It's very important to get the sense of the materiality. Architecture defines the built environment—you need to know what you're doing."



Right: Alessandro Orsini
in his NYC office

“Having the possibility to design a coffee table that is expressly made for that space is an incredible thing.”

—ALESSANDRO ORSINI, PRINCIPAL

On...NYC

“We were looking for a place to put the office, and everybody else wants to be along 10th Avenue or Chelsea. I started to think, for me, my main interest is cities—the way that the urban fabric develops. There is all the reference to New York and to the Empire State Building, so I said, ‘Why not?’”

On...Model Building

“It’s important to build a physical model; it’s important to see the scale of the object. We always test the element through a simple cardboard model called the ‘Phenomenology of Cardboard and Paper.’ It’s a very simple physical model, but it’s under the sun and it gives you the idea of what’s going on inside. You don’t really achieve that quality through computer modeling, and frequently the client doesn’t get it.”

On...His Envious View

“My office view is very inspiring; it changes with the seasons and with the condition of light. At sunset, the sun hits the buildings and everything becomes red. It’s very inspiring, especially if we talk about phenomenology of architecture, how just the reflection of the skin can change so much.”

On...His Latest Project

“For me, architecture is a lot about the sense of proportion and scale within the city, within the space, within a room. The Anti-Gravity Apartment is a small place, but I was very lucky to have the opportunity to design everything: the bookshelves, the coffee table, and the dining table. They are really small details, but they are very important. Having the possibility to design a coffee table that is expressly made for that space is an incredible thing.”

The Anti-Gravity Apartment

Orsini’s client owned two adjacent apartments that needed to be combined into one, so naturally he gutted the interior and built a wall. But not just any wall. An anti-gravity wall. “It was a pretty typical Upper East Side building,” Orsini says. “My main concern was to draw attention somewhere other than the ceiling because it wasn’t very tall. We thought of a wall that was hanging from the ceiling but suspended from the floor.”

The result is an elegant design that both divides and combines the units. The gray wall—modulated on the golden section—plays off the red-stained ground and thickens as it snakes at right angles through the floor plan. The section separating the master bedroom from the living room contains space where the art-collector owner can store her possessions. Not that a casual observer would suspect the tectonic play. “The appearance of the wall doesn’t change,” Orsini says. “What you see is not exactly what it is. The wall is not floating and you can’t tell it contains storage.”

