

# LEE & MUNDWILER \* ARCHITECTURE

## Interview by Tiffany Lee

Falling in love while getting their masters at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, partners in design and marriage, Cara Lee and Stephan Mundwiler of Lee & Mundwiler Architects have garnered national and international fame within the last few years with their stylistically intricate and conceptually intelligent and energy efficient design. Lee, born and raised in Korea, and Mundwiler, in Switzerland, have won three American Institute of Architects (AIA) awards. This eclectic couple is easily the L.A. frontrunner of the modern architectural scene and is bound to become one of the most respected and emulated studios in the country.

**TL:** Why did you decide to become an architect?

**SM:** I guess it was the desire to work creatively and make a difference. Nobody can “escape” architecture. We all live in, with and around it, so therefore the decision was to be part of something significant. Of course, one imagines what it is to be an architect, and the reality of it is that it’s not always so creative.

**TL:** How would you describe your studio’s style?

**SM:** Our style is to react to a given situation, site, client etc. The product is the result of intense assessment about the given task, and is not driven by stylistic decisions, or fashionable things. With that in mind, we can work within a historic context as well as within a modern one. The result is always contemporary, because we use contemporary means, materials and so forth.

**TL:** The results being always contemporary, how do you balance your daring aesthetic and engineering? Do you frequently find your concepts to be intangible?

**SM:** Good point. We often find ourselves in designing schemes that have to be adjusted to reality, because ultimately they have to be made workable, build-able, and often most important, affordable. Yet, we so far managed to keep the quality as initially envisioned throughout the project up to its inception.

**TL:** What awards have you won?

**SM:** Three AIA Awards and several design competition awards. AIA Awards are very gratifying, because they are given to architects by architects.

**TL:** With all of the fame you’ve received within the architectural industry, does the idea of pop culture fame like architect Frank Gehry’s appeal to you?

**SM:** Fame does not matter to us, we are glad we are not exposed like Frank Gehry. I guess what matters more is that our work is being recognized as a quality design.

**TL:** How do you balance a work relationship on top of a marriage?

**SM:** It is very difficult to be an architect and have a partner who is not an architect, or at least in a related field of activity. So we do not have the “stress” of having to explain each other what we are doing all day long and why. “How was your day, Honey?” is not a question in our repertoire. Even if we might often argue about design or business decisions, this is clearly to the benefit of both work and relationship.

**TL:** How do you and Cara differ in design?

**SM:** Cara’s strength is in conceptual design and I am better in detail design and technical issues.

**TL:** What are your ultimate goals in this field?

**SM:** Projects that matter to people, such as public projects, meaningful programs etc.

**TL:** What projects are you working on currently?

**SM:** Several residences in L.A. and Switzerland, the renovation of a museum, and several automated parking structures. We also always work on design competitions to achieve [meaningful projects].

**TL:** Would you live in a house designed by yourselves?

**SM:** Probably, but with all the design work we do, it would be easier for someone else to design it for us [laughs].

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