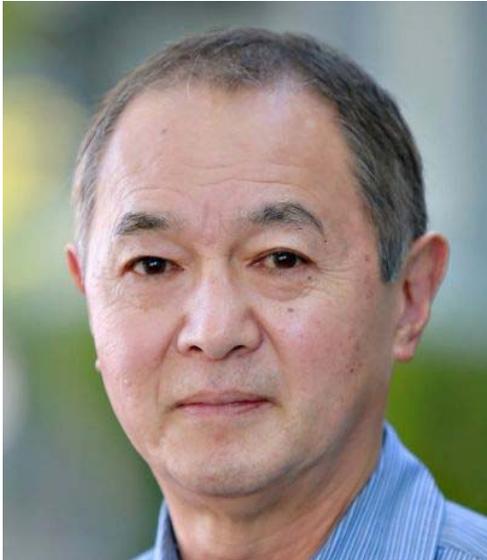


Q&A with Alan Ohashi of Ohashi Design Studio

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Alan Ohashi has been influencing architecture in the Bay Area for nearly 30 years. The principal designer of Ohashi Design Studio, he oversees the development of both residential and commercial spaces. Before opening the 10-person firm that shares his name, Ohashi earned both a Bachelor's and Master's of Fine Arts from University of California, Los Angeles, in the fields of painting, sculpture, photography and cinematography.

He started Visual Communications, a community-based not-for-profit company for which he filmed documentaries. The organization still exists to this day, though he is no longer involved.

Ohashi received a Master's in Architecture at University of California, Berkeley and opened his design studio in 1985. Originally the firm also created furniture, but it has transitioned away from that aspect as they receive more projects.

In addition to upscale residences throughout the Bay Area, Ohashi Design Studio recently completed Presidio Building 640, also known as the Military Intelligence Service Historic Learning Center. Once an airplane hangar, the space now serves as a public museum.

Ohashi, 65, says design is his passion and escape, but he also enjoys swimming and working out in his spare time.

In this lightly edited interview with SFis Homes, Ohashi talks about himself, design trends and the future of his company.

Q: You have degrees in art and architecture. Are there any overlaps between the two, or are they separate worlds?

A: The cinematography degree comes into play when I'm visualizing spaces and buildings. I can, in my mind's eye, walk through spaces as if we were going to film or video them. That helps to make the whole design come together three- dimensionally. In my life, the artistry came first, then I went to UC Berkeley.

One of the biggest differences is the level of permanence. When you're in filmmaking, you work for four years to make social commentary documentaries. There's years of scripts and grant writing, and then someone watches it for half an hour and leaves. I like the permanence that building a structure and architecture has.

Q: What made you pursue architecture?

A: Actually, it was because of my girlfriend - now wife. She was admitted into Berkeley's law school and we were living together in Los Angeles at the time. She encouraged me to apply and I had wanted to get out of L.A. anyway, so it was a good opportunity.

Q: The firm used to design furniture. Do you still?

A: The firm is all-consuming and in itself a lot of work, so I can't do that anymore. It was an important early component to our development, but it's been phased out.

Q: Your firm designs both commercial and residential structures, are there any similarities, or are they completely different worlds?

A: It's the same attitude, but they are different animals. The budgets of commercial developments are tied more to business-making decisions, so there's not the high degree of preciousness a home has.

However, we have more freedom in commercial projects to express ourselves, especially in designing retail stores or offices, because they that want a strong visual aesthetic. Think of it this way: A store or museum wants to shout out who they are and invite people in. It's more of a public expression with signage and curb appeal.

There are some similarities to that in residential design as far as curb appeal goes, but there you're trying to create elegance and serenity that's still private.

Q: Where are some of your designs?

A: The museum in the Presidio is one. That took about 15 years of planning and working to finish. It's a 10,000-square-foot interpretive learning center that opened at the end of last year. We did it for the Japanese-American Historical Society, along with the Presidio Trust and National Park Service. The building served as headquarters for Japanese soldiers to serve as linguists and interpreters during World War II. It was a top-secret mission that only started being declassified in recent history, so it was important for us to be a part of this project, since many of those veterans wouldn't be around to enjoy it if we didn't work on it.

Residentially, we are completing some large new homes in Atherton and Orinda, and we are working on a historic house in the Marina District. That place has a head-on view of the St. Francis Yacht Club and we are installing an extensive roof deck.

Q: Does your work influence how you see the world?

A: Absolutely. It's like it can't be shut off. I appreciate design in any way, shape or form. I love going to art museums or doing home tours. I do a lot of house tours with AIA in the Bay Area. It's enjoyable for me.