

A DAZZLING GEM



**SIMPLE
ELEMENTS
AND SUBTLE
FEATURES
HELP A
TORONTO
JEWELRY
STORE
SHINE –
AND
CAPTURE
THE 2007
WILL CHING
DESIGN
AWARD.**

BY MICHELE MEYER

Even before its redesign was completed, Toronto jewelry store Eko was already garnering attention from the likes of *Interior Design*, *Metropolis*, *Azure* and *Canadian Interiors* magazines. But the night before the store was set to star in a publicity photo shoot, it wasn't quite ready for its close-up.

The redesign of its space – from the ceiling-to-floor glass showcases to the birch laminated floors – was complete, except for one element: the changeable back wall where local artists' displays would hang.

With the much-anticipated photo shoot looming, interior designer Bennett C. Lo, Principal of Toronto-based Dialogue 38, and store owner Mina Yoon decided to create the first piece of art themselves, furiously folding, gluing and soldering materials to the back wall.

"It was an enjoyable process," Lo says, remembering feeling a mix of wonder and panic. "I thought, 'This is cool, but let's finish in time!'"

That hands-on mentality was the spirit of the project right from the start. Since Dialogue 38 was inundated with other projects, and because Yoon was a longtime friend of Lo's, Lo chose to take on the design project himself. When he started his firm five years ago, he did that quite often. But today, with the help of five other designers, Dialogue 38 takes on multiple retail and hospitality projects, using a team-work approach.

"[Today,] we're busy, and I've got a team that goes in and out of projects," Lo says. "But for [Eko], I did 98 percent of the work."

In the end, the photo shoot was a success and the boutique dazzled. But more importantly, the design was chosen as the winner in the 2007 Will Ching Design Competition, which honors exceptional achievement by a firm of five or fewer designers. (Dialogue 38 employed fewer than five designers at the time of the competition.) The award was announced at IIDA's Too Cool gala held in June during NeoCon in Chicago.

But for Lo, transforming this diamond in the rough to a sparkling gem was far from easy. The space itself presented several unique challenges. It was an extremely deep and narrow rectangle of just 580 square feet, which was expanded to 860 square feet in the redesign. Ceiling heights and wall widths all varied. Plus, the budget was tight: less than \$150,000.

Working with close friend Yoon – the two met three years ago through a mutual friend – brought another potential risk. "Working with friends can be good or bad, but fortunately, it was good in this case," Lo says.

A HIDDEN TREASURE

From the street, passersby can only see Eko's illuminated white MDF walls, birch laminated floors and an Italian marble cube that serves as a display case while concealing the cash register. In the window, a lone mannequin hints as to what the store sells. Shoes? Clothing? Jewelry? One has to enter to learn the answer.

"There was a wonderful illusion of searching for hidden treasure," says Kelly Bauer, FIIDA, Principal of Phoenix's richard+bauer and one of

PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED BY DIALOGUE 38





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An Italian marble cube serves as a display case to conceal the cash register.



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—Kelly Bauer, FIIDA, Principal, richard+bauer

four judges responsible for selecting the winning project for the Will Ching award. “The interior grabbed you from the outside. If you were walking by, it was so interesting and appealing that regardless of what it sold, it was an experience you wanted to try out”

Strong lighting and ribbed white walls make the interior lustrous like a pearl while hiding the original building’s defects. And arches visible from the street serve as frames for foot-wide, floor-to-ceiling glass showcases. “Since each [jewelry] designer is unique, Yoon wanted to show product on its own for maximum effect,” Lo says. “She made few demands – just to display the merchandise effectively and efficiently on a neutral background. The rest was wide open to us.”

Each designer’s grouping of jewelry hangs or sits on small

platforms in the tall glass cases throughout the store. Jewelry designers range from New York’s Alexis Bittar to France’s La Tribu Rigaux to Italy’s Paola Volpi. “The environment adds to the displayed jewelry’s panache,” says judge Richard N. Pollack, FIIDA, FAIA, CEO of San Francisco-based Pollack architecture.

Eko, which opened in 2000, was well known in Toronto’s trendy Queen West neighborhood, a fashion district near the Ontario School of Art and Design, long before the redesign. As a result, Lo took the risk of hiding merchandise from the exterior. “[Yoon] has a strong following that knows what she’s about,” Lo says. “We took more of the approach of a gallery space, because the product she carries is very creative.”

The artistic elements were recognized by competition



judges. “Someone took a lot of attention you don’t typically see in a retail application,” says Bauer.

LESS IS MORE

While the challenges were complex, the result is not. “[The design’s] bold, yet simple and elegant execution was so very different from many of the other submissions,” says Brian G. Thornton, IIDA, AIA, IIDA Vice President of Communications, Will Ching judging moderator and Director of Design for MGM MIRAGE Design Group in Las Vegas. “That’s what impressed us. It takes so much more to pull off a simple solution. Less truly is more in this case.”

Lo feels that way about taking credit for his work. He deliberately chose not to make his firm’s name eponymous. “I chose the name [Dialogue 38] to reflect that creative work is a team effort,” he says. “As

for the number, I was 38 at the time.” He also enjoys interior projects because “you can get a grip on a smaller space as opposed to architecture work, and that’s satisfying.” But Lo doesn’t just take on small projects. The firm is working on a number of large assignments, including an 8,000-square-foot restaurant.

Despite the firm’s attempt to remain low-key, its work has caught the attention of established interior designers internationally, including Bauer. “Their approach is innovative, artful and very well executed,” she says.

Whatever is next on Dialogue 38’s plate – big or small – “it says good things for our profession,” Pollack says. “They did a great job with a somewhat limited budget and staff. It proves you don’t have to be a mega-firm to solve your client’s needs.”



Each designer's collection hangs or sits on small platforms in tall glass cases found throughout the store.



The space includes a changeable back wall where local artists' works are displayed.