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DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION ISSUE

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Great Dane

Architect Thomas Juul-Hansen on the simple pleasures of complicated condo designs

POWER PLAYER

Trust Me, Juul Love It

Trends? Bah! Business school dropout Thomas Juul-Hansen aims for clean, timeless designs in some of Gotham's fanciest condo addresses

By Larry Getlen

Photographs
By Emily Assiran

Developer Gary Barnett of Extell seems to have sensed that his company's ultra-grand One57 condo spire on Manhattan's Billionaires' Row — where a penthouse has since sold for nine figures — needed a designer for the interiors for whom simplicity is a defining creed.

Top luxury architect and designer Thomas Juul-Hansen, who came to the profession late and almost by accident, was just that designer.

"Gary called me in 2008, a couple months after the crash," said Juul-Hansen, referencing the Global Financial Crisis. "People were jumping out of buildings because they lost everything, and he calls me and says, 'I want to build the tallest residential condominium building in the Western Hemisphere. And, by the way, we're going to sell it at about \$4,000 per square foot.' Nothing in New York ever sold at \$4,000 per square foot. But he had it financed and was ready to roll."

Juul-Hansen calls working on One57 "an extraordinary experience," noting that one considerable challenge was determining the density of the design given the anticipated price.

"Someone says, 'Here's 2,500 square feet allocated for this apartment.' What can you fit in 2,500 square feet?" said Juul-Hansen. "You can probably do great four-bedroom apartments for \$10 million. But what if we make it a three-bedroom apartment, or a



Thomas Juul-Hansen.

'I can't afford this being something that someone wants to tear up two or three years later.'

two-bedroom? Everything is now scaled in size unlike anything else in the market. So it was interesting to try to constantly push the envelope on scale, because typically people push us in the opposite direction — how much can we shove in here? It's a different way of thinking." Talking to Juul-Hansen makes this type of thinking unsurprising, as the quest for simplicity guides his every notion en route to shaping his design aesthetic.

"My work is very simple, quite honestly," Juul-Hansen — a native of Denmark whose CV also includes 505 West 19th Street by The High Line, Sutton Tower, and both the residence and numerous restaurants for chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten — told Commercial Observer. "Our goal is to make something of significant quality that does not adhere to any specific style to ensure against its becoming outdated.

"I'm in pursuit of timelessness because it costs an extraordinary amount of money to do what we do, and I have an extraordinary responsibility to the people who put up hundreds of millions of dollars to pay for this. I can't afford this being something that someone wants to tear up two or three years later."

One could easily imagine that Juul-Hansen was a natural at his profession, yet he began taking architecture classes only after finding Danish business school "extraordinarily boring."

Having spent a pre-college sabbatical in Miami, Juul-Hansen, who said he had "never been good at anything," returned to Florida with no direction for his life, ultimately deciding on a whim to take an architecture class at the University of Miami.

"I didn't really know anything about architecture, but the idea that you could draw for a living and get a job and pay your bills didn't sound terrible to me," said Juul-Hansen, who lives primarily in Manhattan's Financial District with his wife and four daughters.

Juul-Hansen earned a bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Miami followed by a master's in the subject from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, having quickly fallen in love with the profession.

"It was less about understanding architecture than it was about the process of spending time improving something that you are either making, have made, or are thinking about making," Juul-Hansen said. "The idea of that creative process, I really enjoyed it. I had never really thought about that as a possibility."

After school, Juul-Hansen worked for several architecture firms on the residential side, including Richard Meier & Partners, and credits these jobs with helping develop his eye for detail.

"The first real job I had was with a firm called 1100 Architect," said Juul-Hansen. "They did very precise, very serious residential architecture in the sense that every component was studied very, very carefully. There are some residential architects where you get the mainframe into the right location and then you bang it out, and there are some surprises when it gets built. Oh, we didn't think about this. The firms I worked for studied everything inside and out to make sure that, when it got built, there was nothing that hadn't been considered. I thought that was very good training for me, because it taught me to think."

By the time he founded his own eponymous firm in 2003, Juul-Hansen had established a design philosophy geared toward simplicity, durability and timelessness.

"My goal is to use very clean organizational lines," he said. "People say, 'Oh, your work is so minimal.' But it's not minimal at all. I try to span between simple and classic. I'm not interested in trends, or being avant garde. I'm not so interested in being the first at anything, quite honestly. I don't want to be part of that when I'm managing hundreds of millions of dollars of someone else's money. So we adhere to very simple lines, very simple organizational thoughts, and using high-quality materials, which is extremely important."

Juul-Hansen sees employing only the highest-quality materials as

essential for both form and function.

"We use materials that are not only durable, but that don't date," Juul-Hansen said. "When you have wood, stone and natural materials like that, they tend not to date. That's my objective, to make things that are very simple and clean, but, also, through natural materials, make sure they're warm. It's not classical, it's classic. That's really the goal, to span between classic and modern. I have this stupid running line in my

office: 'Nobody goes to Rome and looks at the travertine and says, "Oh, this is so 200 B.C." That is kind of how I think, you know?'

Juul-Hansen's latest project is a reimagining of the interiors at 720 West End Avenue. The building was originally designed in 1927 by famed Beaux-Arts/Art Deco architect Emery Roth. Its current transformation, spearheaded by developers Glacier Equities and InterVest Capital Partners, found BP Architects handling the exterior restoration and renovations, and Juul-Hansen completely redesigning the building's interiors, including the project's 131 luxury condo units.

Juul-Hansen noted that while the building's interiors were completely designed from scratch, any restoration or renovation takes inspiration from its environment.

"In architecture, when you design in an urban context, you never design from scratch because you have a context," he said. "The Upper West Side and the Upper East Side are completely different towns. The Upper West Side has perhaps more appetite for really strong design solutions that might be very far in one direction or another."

"So we've designed this building with this in mind — that we are on the Upper West Side, and we're in a building that has a lot of soul to it. We try to go back in time and say, if Emery Roth was alive today, what would he appreciate in terms of design? What would be the aesthetic?"

The result is a design sensibility that, for example, would have "a lot of articulation that is more classic than you might see in a new glass building like One57," said Juul-Hansen. "We're leaning on the history, the soul, and the character of this building to try to arrive at architectural interiors that are suited for it. I think we've done quite well in spanning between the modern and the classic."

For Juul-Hansen, achieving this includes ensuring that every aspect of his design is rooted in practicality.

"Everything has to function, right? That's critical," he said. "We don't do things just because they look cool but are going to date two seconds after you built them. Every decision we make has to have one foot planted in practicality and functionality. What does that mean on the Upper West Side? It means I don't need a 4,000-square-foot living room. That doesn't make sense. If I have that much room, I would rather have an eat-in kitchen, a home office, or an extra bedroom."

For the building's material composition, therefore, Juul-Hansen stuck with natural materials.

"The palette is very simple and humble," he said. "All the stone we have in the apartments are very light-colored stone, and the wood is very light as well. The idea is for it to feel young and airy at the same time. But all the cabinets have moldings around the edges, and we have little wainscot stone patterns in some of the bathrooms. There's a level of classic detail we've inserted here that I wouldn't necessarily do on the Upper East Side."

"This is my fourth project now on the Upper West Side," he explained, "so I think we have a very good understanding of who lives there and what they're interested in. I feel we've done very well with this project. I think we've caught the soul of what the building is about."

It was this level of dedication and Juul-Hansen's unique design perspective that made him the right choice for 720 West End's developers.

"It was clear from the beginning that his vision for this project was very different than everyone else's. He very much believed in the beautiful old combined with the beautiful new," said Myles Horn, managing partner of Glacier Equities. "He knew that the entire interior had



be altered so that you still had this beautiful Emery Roth facade, which was maintained. As you walked through the door it was almost like Alice in Wonderland. You went from this beautiful, old building to this brand-new interior. We liked that vision a lot."

In addition to his many New York City projects, Juul-Hansen has begun designing in the Miami market, including the 19-unit luxury condo property 300 Collins Avenue on South Beach.

Given this project's specifics, he took the opportunity to make bolder design choices.

"It was different because we knew this project was going to be 80 percent pied-à-terre. This would be someone's sixth apartment. Half of them sold to New York residents," said Juul-Hansen. "We designed things that were a little

more glam, because Miami is a lot more glam than New York. And we designed things that were a little more aggressive, using materials that were a little bit louder. The stone choices were darker, more dramatic. I wouldn't have done that if it was a primary residence project." Juul-Hansen notes that whatever the particulars of any given project, while he is generally given close to free rein on the creative end, the input of marketing departments is key for incorporating buyer feedback.

"There's typically not a lot of direction in terms of specifics that come from my clients," said Juul-Hansen. "But there's definitely thought about who the buyer is going to be. It's a big conversation that typically involves the team that is going to sell and market the apartments. If they get 12 people coming through

one building saying, 'Oh, we really wish there was a home office in this apartment,' then they call me and say, 'Thomas, the next building, let's make sure you've got home offices in there.' But in terms of the aesthetic, it doesn't really come from them." The simplicity of Juul-Hansen's aesthetic and the success of his projects to date has made him one of the go-to designers for developers looking to distinguish themselves in a luxury sphere seeing exponential development.

"Thomas is immensely talented and has a really beautiful aesthetic. He just has beautiful design," said Van Nguyen of JVP Management, the developer of Sutton Tower. "Thomas understood and appreciated the importance of context, and of coming up with design that

was timeless as opposed to what was a trend at the moment."

Another significant client of Juul-Hansen's has been chef and restaurateur Vongerichten, who had Juul-Hansen design several of his restaurants over the past 20 years as well as his West Village residence.

Juul-Hansen said he and Vongerichten seem to share a keen design sensibility.

"He and I see eye to eye in terms of design. I don't think he has ever changed anything I have proposed to him," said Juul-Hansen.

"There's a lot of trust there. Plus, he reads drawings better than most architects I know."

While Juul-Hansen is clearly keeping busy, his affinity for simple, natural materials makes it unsurprising that he keeps his personal life simple as well, spending every

weekend with his family at their house on Long Island's North Fork, enjoying life's simpler pleasures.

"We have ospreys that fly around with fish in their claws, and rabbits and turkeys and deer," said Juul-Hansen. "We spend a lot of time on the water and really try to be in nature."

But, as with his design, Juul-Hansen manages to blend the modern with the classic in his leisure life as well, confessing an affinity for the most contemporary of hobbies: pickleball.

"We have all started playing pickleball," Juul-Hansen said, "which for someone as unathletic as me turned out to be a very interesting game that we can play despite the fact that I'm 55 and my twins are 7. We're just about at the same level."