

THE 'BEHR' ESSENTIALS

A one-on-one with **BEHR CHAMPANA**, architect & designer of The Dubai Towers, Dubai



From creating science fiction comic characters as an adolescent to creating architectural wonders as an adult, Behr Champana dwells in the reality of his own fantasy world. Vice President of international architectural firm TVS International, Behr is an inspirational and positive force to reckon with a talent for honing talent. Having grown up in Puerto Rico, and educated in Tulane University in New Orleans, Champana is the perfect balance of warmth and city-dweller sophistication. In a rendezvous with A&E, he speaks with Gayathri Krishnan of the "candle flame" that ignited the idea of The Dubai Towers, and the personal enlightenments along the way.

Did you always want to be an architect?
Behr Champana (BC)- Well, when I was in high school, I wanted to be a plastic surgeon. But since I was pretty good at drawing and sketching, especially science fiction comic book characters, my friends often told me I should be an architect. Both plastic surgery and architecture were about creating something unique and new and I was quite confused about which way to go.

At that point, I was dating the daughter of the best plastic surgeon in Puerto Rico and I went into his library and I started going through his books and as destiny would have it, I pulled a book out of his shelf and it was about operations on children with deformities. The book showed images of these children before and after the surgery and the children were still struggling with remnants of the deformities which truly irked me. So much so that, it completely put me off of the idea of becoming a plastic surgeon because the level of empathy I felt for those children was far more than I could bear. I thought to myself that if I couldn't completely rid a child of his physical challenges because of the limits of surgical techniques or technology, I wouldn't be able to live with myself. It was a turning point in my life because that's when I knew I couldn't be a plastic surgeon, and I started pursuing my other passion, architecture, vehemently.

Reigning from a place like Puerto Rico where colour and vibrance are such a big part of the cityscape, does it feel odd to be an architect in a world that is

gravitating towards towers of colourless glass and cement?

(BC)- Well I think every project has its own opportunity which is based on client objectives and one has to be sensitive to that. You have to remember that you are creating a project according to a client's specific vision. Their goal might be to augment real estate value, or build a home for themselves, and that cannot limit you; as an architect you cannot have any limits.

I have been working abroad since 1992 and found that, especially in the States, the developers have a very "bottom-line" mentality and when I started working in South America, Europe and even in Dubai for that matter, I was respected more as an architect and was valued for what I had to offer as a designer. But nothing can deter you, for as an architect you have to evolve and be willing to change. So the more you travel, the more exposure you get to different sensibilities, technology, complexities of projects and so on. The greatest architects are ones who've evolved and you can clearly see that evolution when you compare their earlier works to the current. And I want to be an architect who is constantly learning and innovating.

As for working with colour and vibrance, we have done projects in Aruba and that was totally vernacular. We did the research on the area, the architecture, the culture and infused all that into the design. So with each country, even with modern architecture you can blend the creative with the contextual. It is an art that is challenging and exciting; so there are no limits, no matter what kind of design parameters are laid out for you.

What was the first architectural structure that fascinated you and why?

(BC)- The Pompidou Centre in Paris was one of the most amazing things I had ever seen. I was always very keen on figuring out what direction I was going to take as an architect and designer and early on, in second year of college, what I did find was that you've got to let the essence of building come out. The Pompidou centre did not look like a museum yet the structure served that purpose with such inventiveness. They exposed a lot of the mechanical systems, and building systems on the outside, giving more space to exhibit and I thought that was



genius. That made me realize the direction I would take as an architect because it taught me that the essence of a building will always reveal itself to you and you have to make something unique out of that. It is not about being safe or commercially viable; it is about exploring the concept and purpose behind the project and pushing the limit.

Speaking about pushing the limit- tell us about the Dubai Towers, Dubai and its unique design?

(BC)- The shape of the Dubai Towers, Dubai is inspired by the flames of a candle. The Dubai Towers was conceptualized to be an iconic landmark and they were looking for something that had never been done and something that symbolized Dubai. The Falcon had been done in Abu Dhabi, The Palm had been done, and the Sailboat had been done as well. Dubai has a lot of history but to be able to turn that into an abstraction and then into a building, is not an easy task and some good projects had already been developed, so it was tough. We started working on the project in October 2004 with Sama Dubai and in a few months we were asked to show something concrete design-wise and after master-planning I started thinking, "What is Dubai?"

The city was at the cutting-edge of construction, construction-management, cultural integration, had the largest man-made island, the tallest building in the world which had been announced recently; so as I thought about it more I realized

that Dubai was at the forefront of every kind development, it was always looking forward.

During that time I had made a visit to Istanbul and saw the Blue Mosque and one thing that struck me was that all the chandeliers that had lit the mosque were candles. Hundreds of thousands of candles illuminated the mosque and that's when it came to me; Dubai was providing that illumination not only to the region but to the world about how to manage construction and cultural integration. "Enlightenment" was the concept and it was a great and new symbol of Dubai that was not the Falcon, or the sea or the sand.

I had 5 teams working on the project and every time we had an idea for design before the one with the flame of the candle, we were never able to satisfy the client. I never really shared my idea of enlightenment, but I had started sketching the idea on napkins and made a mental picture in my mind. The idea was so out of the box that it was hard to explain and after eight weeks the client was getting very nervous and so were we because I knew there were bigger architectural firms lurking, wanting the job. So that's when we knew we had to go to the next level and be a lot more abstract and symbolic. That's when I shared my idea with my team and explained the concept, and they laughed. My team said "that's not a building" and didn't take it too seriously but one of my architects, Howard Chen, said that he liked it and that he thought it had a lot of potential and then we worked on it

together; we presented it to the client and they loved it, and the rest is history.

What are the personal truths that guide you as an architect?

(BC)- I'm after the creative process; the joy that I find in finding the right solution to something is overwhelming. I could be just as happy designing someone's garage expansion or a doll house for a little girl as I am doing the big architectural projects because I'm just after a good creative process.

Because of the position I am in my company today, I get involved with the concept planning and also mentoring members of my team. I'm not about making the history books; if I see someone who is striving to be better than they are, I will do my very best to make them the best they can be.

What is your definition of success?

(BC)- My definition of success is how I perceive or measure what I've achieved. It is about going after something, establishing the vision on how to achieve it and pursuing that vehemently, because success is not about what's at the end of the road, it's about what you learn along the way. Success is far more spiritual than what we understand and it's so very personal; something that can not be coloured by someone else's view of you, it is your own perception of your achievements and your life. 