



CREATIVE DIFFERENCES

Studio Tractor's principals don't agree on much. Except good design.

By Christopher Moraff / Portraits by Eric Luc

There is a Polish saying that translates to “Strong like bull, smart like tractor.” For Mark Kolodziejczak and Michael Tower, the creative halves of Studio Tractor Architecture, the phrase elucidates the artistic and practical vision that inspires their collaboration. In fact, the friends adapted it for their company’s name. “[Tractors] represent this emblem of utility and simplicity and beauty at the same time,” explains Tower. “It just seemed like a great way to frame our approach.”

Kolodziejczak and Tower met as as classmates at Cooper Union in the early '90s, enjoying a mutual respect for each other's ar-

chitectural strengths. They decided to mesh their talents in 2004 with the launch of their firm, but as Kolodziejczak readily admits, he and Tower rarely agree on every aspect of a project. “I always tell my clients they’re getting two for the price of one, because we don’t always agree with each other, but we’ll hash it out until we have great ideas to present to them.”

Design Bureau sat down with the former classmates and current business partners to find out how two distinctly different people and personalities can come together to create a clean and cohesive style.

Christopher Moraff is a freelance writer and photographer whose work has appeared in a number of national and international publications. He lives in Philadelphia and his work can be found online at www.christophermoraff.com.

Opposite page (from left): Mark Kolodziejczak and Michael Tower

Q&A: MICHAEL TOWER

Did your upbringing in Detroit influence the way you approach your work? It influences me quite a bit. It was just about being surrounded by a lot of people who were hands-on and mechanically oriented. That really framed my view of the world and the way I approach architecture.

Who were some of your early influences? Music had a big effect on me when I was younger, especially the emergence of electronic music. It was a very immediate kind of way to engage in artistic expression. But I would say the artist Gordon Matta-Clark had the greatest influence. His work reflects so much of what I was interested in back then. The decay of the buildings in Detroit, the exposure of structure and the interior, the literal deconstruction of space was critically important to me as a young architect.

Why do you think that you and Mark work so well together? We've always shared a common language. In terms of design, we are very collaborative; we push each other, we trade off ideas and we make concessions and formulate a vision together. We have this amazing ability to be arguing with each other and realize we've been arguing the same point. I'd say we disagree as often as we agree and I don't think that's a bad thing. I think it makes for a better kind of design. It's less polemical and more what's appropriate.



“[Mark and I] have always shared a common language... we have this amazing ability to be arguing with each other and realize we've been arguing the same point.”

—MICHAEL TOWER, PRINCIPAL

Studio Tractor is a big proponent of pre-fabrication. Why? Prefabrication is something that has always been interesting to me as an extension of my interest in manufacturing and what would seem to be a kind of logical transition into the production of architecture. It offers a certain economy of production; thermal and structural efficiency. It's harder to put your finger on what's prefabricated or not anymore, and I think that's the success.

QUICK QUESTIONS with STUDIO TRACTOR

	<i>Michael Tower</i>	<i>Mark Kolodziejczak</i>
<i>Black or white?</i>	White	Black
<i>Jazz or Classical?</i>	Jazz	Classical
<i>Wood or metal?</i>	Wood	Wood
<i>Silver or gold?</i>	Silver	Silver
<i>Beef or chicken?</i>	Tofu	Beef
<i>Beatles or Stones?</i>	Beatles	Stones
<i>Cats or dogs?</i>	Dogs	Dogs
<i>Beer or wine?</i>	Wine	Beer

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Cotter-Pin Bicycle Rack—Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, CT

A byproduct of a longstanding relationship with metal fabricator Peter Kirkiles, the bicycle rack grew out of discussions about furniture and furniture designs. When they architects were invited by the Aldrich Museum to design a temporary bicycle rack for its *Bike Rides* exhibition, they imagined a piece of site furniture with the same sensibility as a piece of furniture. The rack expresses the simplicity of a bent metal cotter pin.

Photo by Studio Tractor



How do the words “clarity” and “simplicity” translate to your work? I think that there is something to be said about framing experience and framing space in a way that allows you to inhabit it and really engage with it, which is something I think we’ve always appreciated about early modernism and traditional modernism. There’s a real directness to letting light into a space—expressing a material, expressing a connection between two materials or a connection between two spaces.

If you could meet any person, living or dead, who would it be? Three people, actually: [German

composer] Karlheinz Stockhausen, mostly because of his work in pioneering experimental and electronic music; Konrad Wachsmann, a modernist architect and engineer who I’ve researched over the years and have been completely fascinated with; and [musician and Roxy Music co-founder] Brian Eno. *Music for Airports* sort of changed my life as a teenager.

Tell me something about you that our readers may not know. I have a son who is three and a half. Being a parent is the hardest job you’ll ever love.

What single word best describes your architectural vision? Simplicity.

"Mark and Michael are very partial to using wood in their designs and that's where we come in. They both have a deep appreciation for the beauty and warmth that hardwoods like claro walnut can impart to a room and the way they use it highlights the wood's special properties."
 —SKIP KISE, GOOD HOPE HARDWOODS



Artists' Loft—New York, NY

This renovation was a collaboration with two artists—a wood carver and a painter—who were looking to showcase their work in their two-story apartment. Eliminating as many partitions as possible, Studio created an open staircase that connected the second floor to a double-height presentation area, offering an elevated view of the freestanding wood sculptures and paintings. The artwork was foregrounded by discrete lighting and minimalist fixtures in the gallery, the design of which still supported the daily functional needs of the clients.

Photos by Chuck Choi



Q&A: MARK KOLODZIEJCZAK

What inspired you to look artistically at the world around you and who were some of your early influences?

Growing up where I did [on the south side of Chicago], I was aware of the city's architectural tradition. But it was in high school, when I first took up photography, that I really started looking at the city in a very particular way. As for influences, I'd say there are two people who also happen to be very tied-in with Chicago; photographer Aaron Siskind and also Richard Nickel, who photographed all the demolition of Louis Sullivan's buildings. He actually died in one of Sullivan's buildings on the same day I was born. *[Nickel died in April 1972, when a staircase fell on him while he was attempting to salvage part of the interior of Louis Sullivan's Chicago Stock Exchange as it was being demolished.]*

Tell me about your working relationship with Michael.

Michael has a very linear way of thinking and a particular methodology that I find inspiring. I am a little bit more of an elliptical thinker; I always have two points of reference. I have my own trajectory. Usually in partnerships everyone has a job to do, but when it comes to design there is typically only one strong voice, but I feel that doesn't apply here. We both look at a project and the solution we come up with is the one that's the right one for that project. I think that's rare and I think that's why we are where we are today.

You've used the term "poetry of materials." What do you mean by that?

I think that people tend to have a limited conception of materiality, and the sense of value of material is not really apparent to people. We're trying to be experimental about our materials. I think when you are presented with limitations, it's a testament to how creative and how ingenious you can be with the simplest means. It could be something as simple as wrapping a door handle with leather or changing the tone of a room by simply changing the temperature color of an LED bulb.

Does your experience with photography influence your architecture?

Photography still plays a big role in how I approach projects, because it's about framing the experience: what you see, when, and who sees it. To some degree, you're really controlling the experiences; it's not unlike how you crop a photograph. But as a photographer you either have it or you don't. I mean you can look at an image and say whether it works or not, but architecture is outside of your realm, and after you've walked away from it, it may age with time gracefully or not.

If you could meet any person, living or dead, who would it be?

Walter Pichler, who is a great sculptor/architect from Austria; or I'd love to sit down and have a great conversation with [artist] James Turrell.

Tell me something about you that our readers may not know.

I'm married to sculptor Veronica Frenning, and, as an undergraduate, I designed a house for a blind photographer.

What single word best describes your architectural vision?

Honesty. 🍷



The Black Forest Planks of the Hochman Gallery

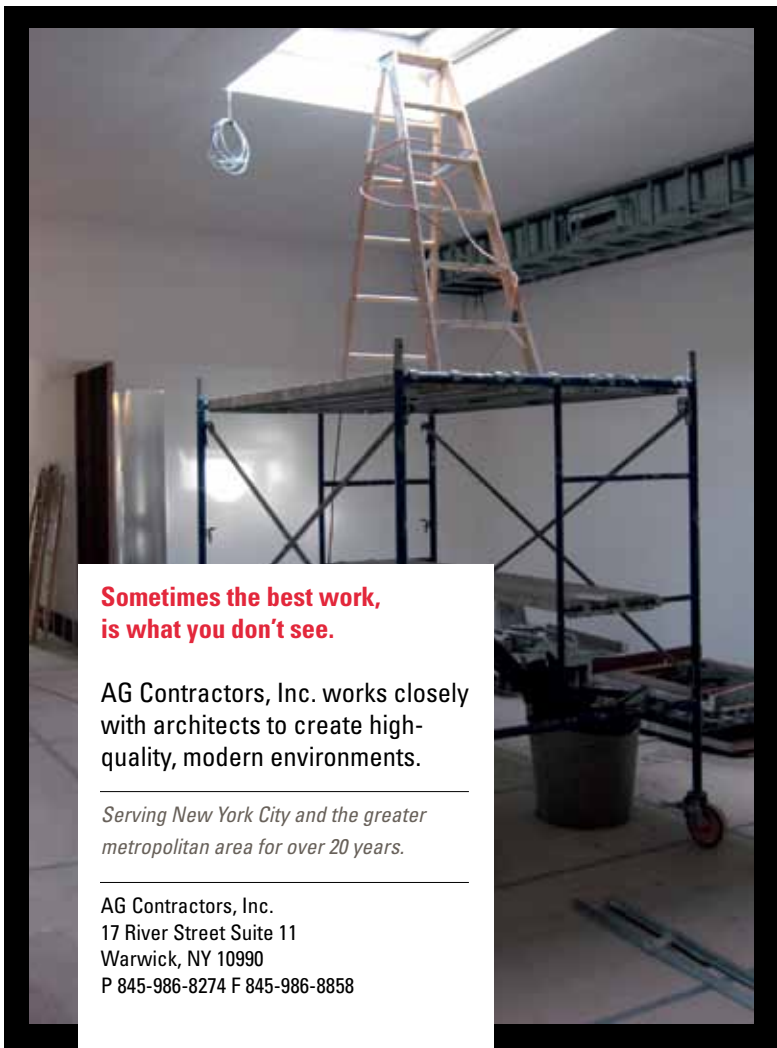
Tower and Kolodziejczak recently completed work on the Hochman Gallery, an expansive gallery space that relocated from Manhattan to a former metal-casting facility in Long Island City, NY.

"The whole thing about doing a gallery is you kind of have to stay out of the way of the art," says Kolodziejczak. "You really have to be very mindful and respectful of the fundamentals of viewing art—that is, the light and the space around the art, and keeping the walls simple, but strong enough to hang a Cadillac from."

In their design, Tower and Kolodziejczak chose one-of-a-kind flooring planks made from 100-year-old Douglas firs sourced from the Black Forest in Germany. The planks, which measure 12 meters long and 45 centimeters wide, were supplied by Dinesen, a Danish firm. "They are really beautiful," says Tower. "There are no joints in between the lengths of the boards. They are really more monolithic, almost like a concrete floor, but with the warmth of the wood."

According to Bente Kruse, an associate with Dinesen, the inspiration came from the Saatchi Gallery in London, another Dinesen project. "The characteristically long and wide Dinesen Douglas planks proved to be the perfect solution for the main gallery room at Hochman Gallery," she says. "They bring an elegant, calm and light aesthetic that complements the architectural design of the space and leaves room for the visitors to be immersed in the art."

Above: the Saatchi Gallery in London



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