interview with designer héctor esrawe

héctor esrawe
portrait © designboom

héctor esrawe is a mexican designer whose work encompasses everything from interiors to residential and commercial spaces and the production of artisanal and industrially manufactured furniture. designboom caught up with him at his studio in mexico city to learn more about his work process and much more...

designboom: do you remember what made you want to become a designer?

héctor esrawe: as a child I would always dismantle objects (watches, mechanical objects, toys etc.) and try to put them back together - to see how they worked. I wanted to see the soul of these things and understand them inside out. all the time I was growing up I liked looking at buildings, objects, artworks - it was something intuitive. then when I was about 17 years old I discovered that the common link between everything that I liked was design - and I've been hooked ever since.

field table

DB: who or what has been the biggest influence on your approach to design?

HE: there have been a great many influences, too many to list. but my teacher oscar hagerman was a particularly big influence on me in the early years. he opened my eyes to the social, emotional and human benefits of design. when I was a student I started working with him and travelling to different parts of mexico, learning all the time.

esrawe studio (4 articles)

interview with designer héctor esrawe
dec 11, 2014

mi casa, your casa by hector esrawe and ignacio
nov 21, 2014

antonio munohierro + esrawe studio: el
apr 29, 2012

rojkind + esrawe: tori-tori restaurant
nov 23, 2011

DB: did you start your own studio immediately after graduating?

HE: no, I worked in a studio for about a year, but quickly realized that I wanted to choose the projects I would work on myself, I needed control over that. so il started my own studio, I was naive and made a lot of mistakes - I was just 22. but I already had the the core idea behind my studio, which was that I wanted to find a way to use mexican artisanal techniques in a new way, to open up some new discussions about design in mexico. on a trip to helsinki I noticed that art, design and craft were held in equal esteem in most galleries and that changed my way of thinking. in finland the designer, the artist and the artisan see themselves as equals and I understood then that that is what had to change in mexico. I've worked in that way ever since, working horizontally rather than hierarchically. I don't impose the 'design world' on the artisan - rather I propose a collaboration based on mine and his skills. another important part of our approach is to never stereotype. I still have no idea of what 'mexican design' is.

stack sideboard

DB: how has your studio evolved over the years?

HE: the studio is now 23 years old - so many, many things have changed! something that hasn't changed is that I don't wan't to define who I am as a designer or what the studio does. I always try to keep every door open and not be categorized.

DB: how do you keep your ideas fresh?

HE: we continually collaborate with people that have different skills from us - people or studios that expand our knowledge and take our work into different areas, which is really nice - you can't get bored this way.

centipede bench

models of the centipede benches at esrawe studio
photo © designboom

DB: what do you think your strongest skill is?

HE: to be a good conductor - I'm able to orchestrate a project well. what I've learned to do is take a big complicated project and deconstruct it into smaller challenges, assign them to people I know will do an excellent job and then reconstruct all of the work back into one thing.

balanza

DB: how did you come to start your collaboration with ignacio cadena / cadena y asociados and what you enjoy most about the type of work you do together?

HE: nacho is a man of many talents, he's an architect, a designer and very astute with regards to branding... he knows a lot about a lot of things. we met about 6 or 7 years ago when a few different clients invited us to work on their projects - we thought that since people were naturally pairing us up we should probably work together right from the start of a project. our first joint venture was cielito querido cafe which was a coffee chain that out to be very popular in mexico. we've since done many projects together, probably about 70% of our work is together but we each do things with other collaborators.

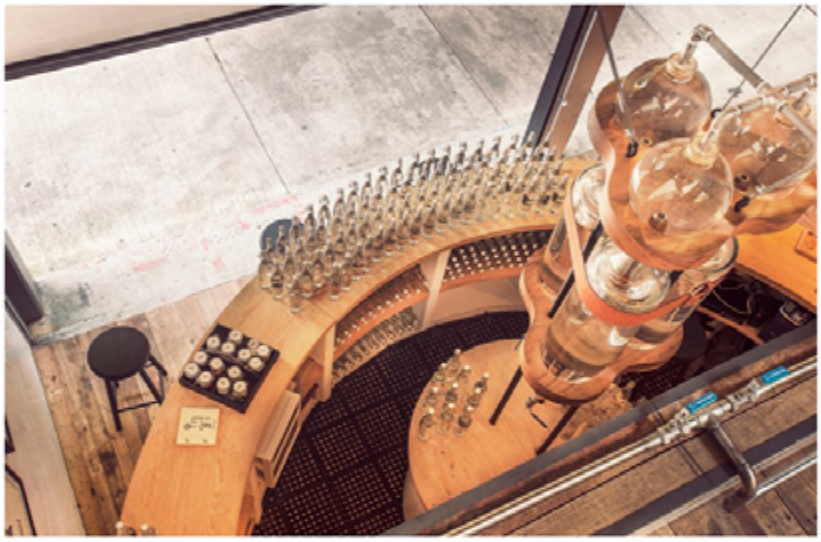
cielito querido cafe by esrawe studio and cadena y asociados

cielito querido cafe

DB: what things have you learned from that particular collaboration?

HE: how we work together has evolved over the last six years. at a certain point we realized that when we are creating a new brand or experience these things can't be just what we wan't but what they need to be in order to serve their purpose and be successful. in that respect we can't always do what the client wants either - but rather, what they need. this can be very tricky news to break to a client but we have gradually learned how to handle this. the process is what is most important. if we follow a good process then lost of good solutions will come from it. it is not a race to find one 'perfect' solution.

casa del agua by esrawe studio and cadena y asociados

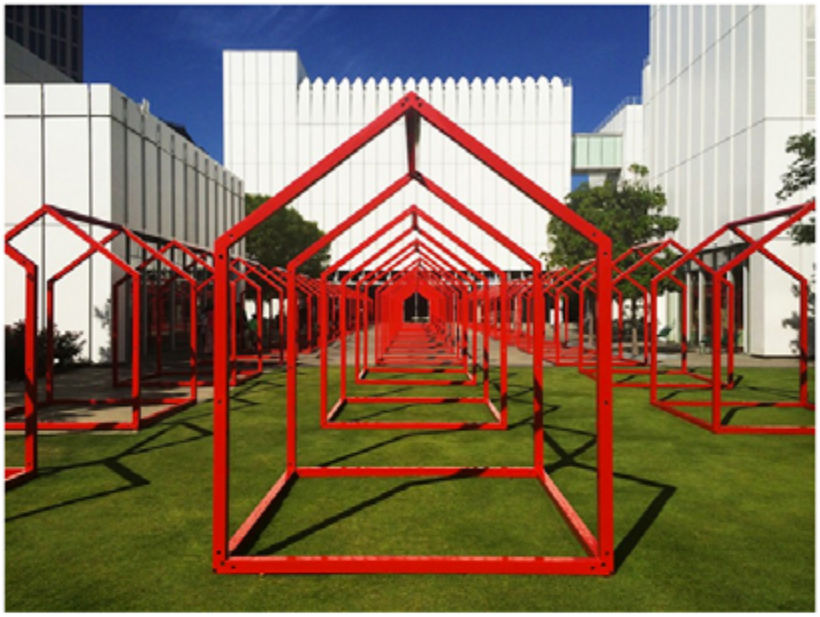


casa del agua by esrawe studio and cadena y asociados

DB: please could you tell us more about your process?

HE: we never start a project by sketching, we digest what the client has told us and then start with very intense research. using the research we map out the co-ordinates of a route to the solution that we need to arrive at. using these co-ordinates we can begin working on ideas and design. many people don't do that - they simply swallow what the client asks for and respond quickly with a gut feeling, an obvious solution - without understanding the bigger picture.

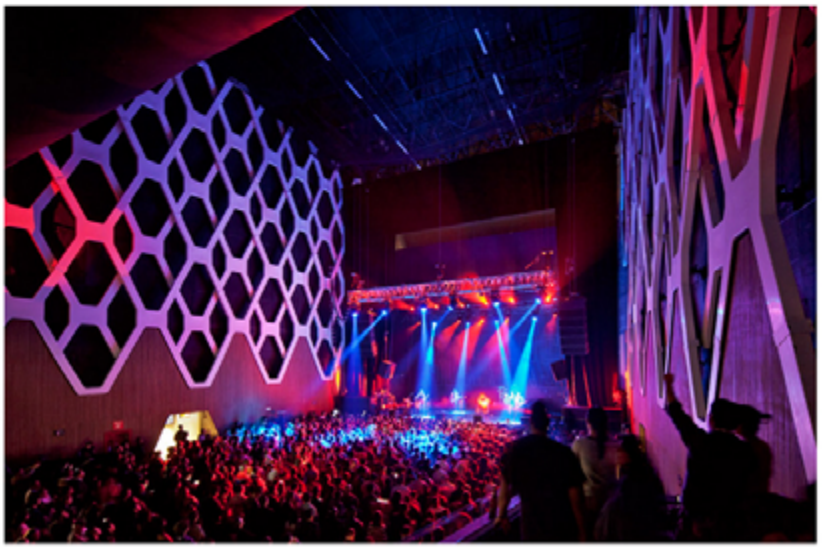
when we present our ideas to the client it's thorough a presentation, 100s of slides long, that takes the client through our process and ending with one holistic solution to all their needs. this way opinions and questions of taste are not up for discussion - we're proposing something that is what it needs to be. we show them what it's going to be and how its going to - look right down to the smallest details - everything - the soul of their brand.



see designboom's article on this project

DB: what part of a project do you enjoy the most?

HE: I like the technical parts of a project very much. figuring out how something will be realized. but more than a part of a project I like all the different places that design can take you. if you are designing a shoe shop then you learn all about that world. next might be an art installation - so you learn about something else. I love how all the different projects start to connect and overlap in your mind. being a designer is a really great way to experience and learn about the world - your mind stays very fit as a designer.



el plaza condesa by antonio muñohierro + esrawe studio