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A Fair-Minded Architect Redraws

By [ALEXANDRA CHENEY](#)

Architect David Ling has no problem existing in midair. In his home and office space in Gramercy Park, his bed juts out over a pool of water a story below. And much of his new architectural project—a redesign of the lighting and layout for New York's Sculpture Objects & Functional Art Fair (SOFA)—takes place 10 feet above patrons' heads.



Philip Montgomery for The Wall Street Journal

David Ling in his Gramercy Park home. The architect has revamped his original design for the SOFA New York art fair at the Park Avenue Armory.

"Floating high over the exhibitions will be a huge cube of light, out of which smaller blocks of light explode, traveling to all points within the hall like newly formed stars," Mr. Ling said. "You are not forced to experience it, but it is always there, floating above you."

A native of Bethesda, Md., Mr. Ling settled in New York in 1984. He oversaw the layout of the inaugural SOFA New York in 1998, and is revamping that design for this year's show.

The Journal sat down with the 53-year-old architect in to discuss his latest design, which better democratizes the booths on the floor. The 15th anniversary edition of SOFA New York, featuring contemporary works from

44 participating galleries, starts Friday at the Park Avenue Armory.

Why redesign the fair's layout after 15 years?

I think there is an interesting hierarchical issue that some fairs have. At the beginning is where the highest-priced real estate is. Then you have the standard grocery aisles where you enter at the beginning, go up and down the aisles, and then you return. We formed a courtyard, so the space was a bit more equitable. The fancy real estate is distributed more evenly, so it is not so much first class, second class.

Did the galleries push back on that design?

Yes. Contemporary art has become so crazy. It's just this investment vehicle. Galleries seem to be really important. So we went through several options. The one we arrived at had to do with forming this courtyard and having this communal but neutral space so it wasn't so gallery orientated. The evolution was to make it more of an art-centric space and not so commercial. But the galleries pushed back. So we lifted the courtyard into the air.

That solved it?

We lifted the courtyard and put it over the café. So you have this core origin, which is now the café and a floating box over the café with cutouts. The lights correspond and explode out of the cutouts. We clumped the lights together, favoring courtyards and aisles so they are orientation devices. Those orientation points make the retail experience less exhausting because you always know where you are.

As an architect, was it difficult to design the fair, knowing it will highlight others' work?

No. It's all about integrating the art with the space. It's better if they are dependent on each other rather than a non-zero-sum kind of stupidity. The architecture should be carved out for the object.

How much has living and working in New York informed that feeling?

A lot. New York lacks public space. We do a lot of high-end residential with involved urban environments. It is highly restrictive. We look at three things, to begin with: where the light comes through, how high the ceiling heights are and how big the elevator is that you have to ship everything though. And how much you have to bribe the elevator man to take down the garbage. There's a different tool kit involved in creating a spatial experience that will be enduring.

Have you had any enduring spatial experiences living in the city?

The city has become more commercial as opposed to creative. I think when it was dirtier and less safe there was more creative rawness a couple decades ago. Now it's really safe and luxurious to many people. It's got really good food. I don't get mugged as often but it's also less interesting. There many be less porno shops and less hookers on the street and less crack or whatever being used, but it's less creative and much more consumptive.

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