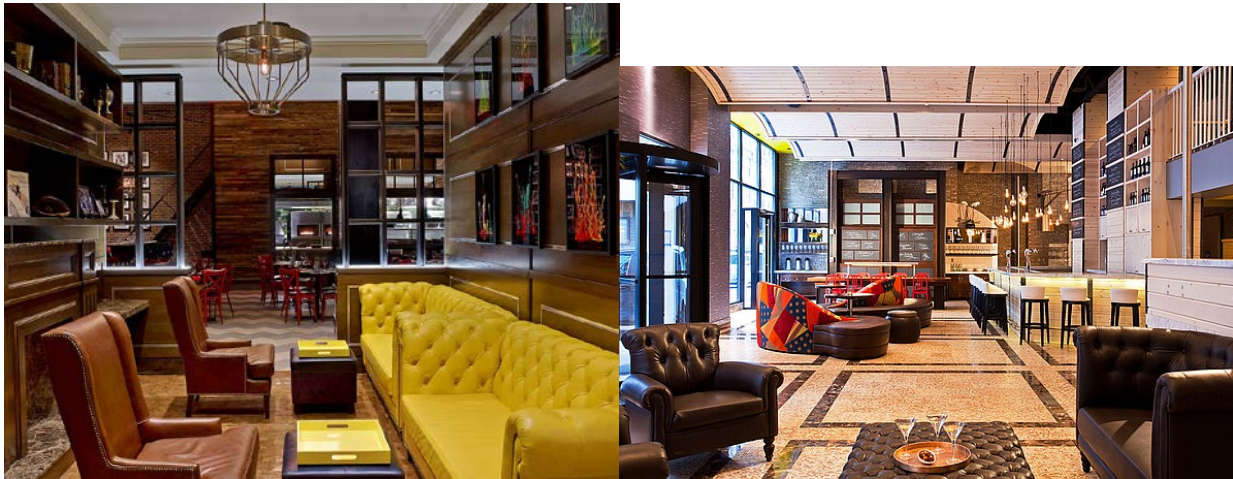


INTERIOR DESIGN®

10 Questions With... Glen Coben

Andrew Stone | September 02, 2014



Influential New York architect and designer Glen Coben has spearheaded significant projects across the globe for three decades. Following studies at Cornell, he joined the team at [SITE Projects](#), where he worked on the [four continents Bridge](#) in Hiroshima and the plaza and park at [Ross's Landing](#) in Tennessee, before becoming a retail design mastermind at Niketown. Later, as principal at [Rockwell Group](#), he worked on the Theater for the Academy Awards in Hollywood and Atlanta's Coca-Cola Sky Field. Coben opened [Glen & Company](#) in 2000 where he and his team incorporate keen brand insight into a wide spectrum of design projects—hotels and award-grabbing eateries ([Archer New York](#), Flatotel, [Carbone](#), [Del Posto](#), to name a few), retail spaces and corporate venues, and elevated residential spaces. Here, he shares his perspective on which principles push his team ever-forward.



Interior Design: What are the new needs of today's hospitality client that may be different from what they were looking for five years ago?

Glen Coben: The biggest change is speed. Everything's happening so quickly that our clients have an expectation that we can go from concept to completion in a lot less time than even a few years ago. This need for speed sometimes short-circuits the design process, leading to potential change orders down the road. I'm all for making things happen quicker, but we can't sacrifice the quality of the documentation or design integrity. Finding a balance with our clients requires patience and an open dialogue. Fortunately, we've been blessed to work with many who understand that a proper process will lead to a better product.

ID: When designing for a high-traffic project such as a retail space, a hotel, or a restaurant, utility can't be sacrificed for concept, and vice versa. How do you keep these needs in check and do you get them to work in harmony?

GC: This is the age-old question of form following function. First of all, we work with amazing consultants, from kitchen designers—food service designers—to engineers and other architects when planning projects. I always tell our restaurant clients, "If the food can't get out of the kitchen in a seamless manner and the dirty plates and glasses can't get back into the kitchen smoothly, it doesn't matter how great of a design we have created. The restaurant cannot function and we've failed you." We won't begin to design a front-of-house until the issues of operations, service, and guest flow are worked out.

ID: Archer New York, Carbone, that beautiful Madison hotel, all the great work with Nike—these projects showcase very different sides of what you can accomplish. What principles would you say make these projects distinctively yours?

GC: I've always loved stories. I've always loved music and art. In music, the notes haven't changed, but each artist and each song is different. The connecting threads are the voices and point of view. I'm excited and proud to be known as a bit of a chameleon, able to change and adapt styles to each and every project. I've also always been a collaborator, ever since I first met James Wines and worked at SITE. Through collaboration with our clients, we're better suited to tell their stories. I personally love a diverse grouping of projects that allow us the opportunity to work in many different languages and styles.

ID: What are some projects currently on your plate—or that you've recently completed—that are expanding your firm's repertoire and keeping you engaged?

GC: We've made a big move into high-end residential work. I love that we are touching the same surfaces that we are touching in hospitality but the guest is different. It's less transient and more permanent. In hospitality, we are working on the first two "urban" EVEN hotels in New York City for IHG and two local developers. Wellness is such an important issue for all of us and I love taking the guiding principles that IHG has set up and are ratcheting them up for the New York market.

Archer New York, along with the soon-to-open Adelphi Hotel in Saratoga Springs, are examples of independent hotels where we were hired to develop the story and design with a focus on luxury and value. Before these hotels, we were known as a firm who brought great design to existing brands and flags, adapting the brand designs to a local market. Generally speaking, these hotels are two- and three-star hotels or select service hotels. They're wonderful projects with fantastic clients, but they are more value-driven than luxury. Three of these projects were birthed during the recent "Great Recession" and they're opening within a span of two months in the Financial District. On the heels of the recently opened Archer New York, we've been quietly very busy.

ID: You're obviously very smart at helping a client identify a brand identity and understand the opportunities they have to play within that identity. Where did this ability come from?

GC: I was fortunate to have worked at some amazing places, from SITE to the Rockwell Group, where I was blessed to have amazing mentors and friends like James Wines and David Rockwell. But I think my time at Nike as the Director of Store Design really allowed me to understand the concept of experiential marketing. It's what we now call "branding." The mission of the Niketown program was to create a three-dimensional expression of the Nike brand. Everything you touched, smelled, and saw was about explaining the brand values of Nike. Design was king, and only a handful of us can claim to have been on the 50-yard line during this amazing time of retail design. Today, I'm fortunate to leverage this experience and combine it with the idea of a guest experience, allowing us to tell the specific stories our clients are asking us to realize—in 3-D.

ID: Are you inspired when a client comes well armed with tear sheets, opinions, and inspiration they've picked up—or wary? How has your role shifted as clients have ever more access to information and imagery?

GC: Our role as "chief storyteller" has not changed. . . Only the tools and toolbox have changed and developed over the years. Fourteen years ago, when I first started my practice, I used to fight when clients came in with tear sheets. I quickly learned that the best way to understand our clients was to get in their heads and try and understand their point of view. We truly embrace tear sheets. We've embraced Pinterest and set up private boards for each project. Our clients have access to their boards and we have been having very meaningful dialogues with our clients through this interactive tool.

ID: Why is it so crucial that hospitality venues be holistically aware of brand identity, and what are some examples from your work where being "on message" has worked out beautifully for clients?

GC: Understanding a specific brand identity gives us the chance to create a seamless guest experience. When we're involved with the collaboration of the brand ID, both the brand ID and the design of the space—meaning the product—is much better aligned

because we can really play around with a tone of voice or language that is unique to the specific project. A buy-in by our client at this juncture allows everyone on the team to have a vested interest in the project. The decisions become specific to the project's language, and not random.

ID: What's your preferred way of communicating with clients—the dynamic you strike, the kind of information you like to glean from your interactions, the degree of latitude with which you like to play?

GC: We're constantly adapting our communication styles to fit in with each client's needs, wants, and styles. Pinterest is probably our most important tool in communicating ideas and concepts with clients. Still, my preference is to have face-to-face meetings. Nuance is lost in an email or telephone call. We have worked around the world, have Skype-d, Facetimed, and video chatted and have succeeded without ever meeting some of our clients, but I prefer the old-school methodology of meeting, sketching, and communicating across a table, or next to each other at a bar. And we love latitude in the creative process, but as collaborators and chameleons, we thrive on received feedback and data.

ID: What are the traits you look for in those that you hire, and what is the creative conversation like within your office?

GC: We have a completely open studio. An office is too old-fashioned and stuffy. Our studio's filled with tremendous designers, architects, and storytellers. I'm blessed to have the most talented and dedicated staff in the 14-year history of the firm. The specific traits for those we hire are a desire to push the envelope each day, dream, take on more responsibility than one could imagine, laugh, cry, and be a part of a small team.

ID: You obviously work from a place of great inspiration. What inspired you early in your career and how are you inspired today?

GC: Early on in my career, I had amazing mentors, great jobs, and worked on projects that were crazy for someone just out of architecture school to work on. Passion, excellence, loyalty, commitment, and collaboration were always the guiding principles wherever I worked because I only wanted to work at places that embodied these ideals. Today, I'm inspired by the people who give us the opportunities to create the buildings, dining rooms, and spaces on which we're so fortunate to work. The passion and commitment that our clients have for their projects is what drives me everyday. Their budget woes are mine. Their challenges to open on time are my challenges. Just today, Batard restaurant received a three-star review in the The New York Times. . .Their joy in a three-star review is my joy. I am inspired by my amazing team. Their passion and commitment fill me with joy beyond words. Lastly, I'm inspired by my wife and daughter.

