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The fashionable ARCHITECT



With Harvey Nichols, Kurt Geiger and, of course, Manolo Blahnik, amongst his clients, Nick Leith-Smith has had his fair share of dealings with the fashion world – but, as **Gemma Knight** discovers, that's certainly not all there is to this Hong Kong-born designer and architect

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At the age of five, Nick Leith-Smith was already leaving parents and teachers aghast at his drawing skills, even trading a picture done for his class's end of year exhibition for a friend's new pencil case ("He won the year art prize and three gold stars with it!" he tells me with a chuckle) – so, more than thirty years later, it stands to reason that he's become one of the UK's leading experts in bespoke contemporary design, working on anything from one-off furniture commissions to new-build private houses.

"I have always sketched cityscapes and landscapes. Growing up in Hong Kong fuelled my fascination with cities and the effect they have on behaviour," Nick tells me. "I remember the first time I consciously thought someone actually designed buildings as a job, and from that moment on I knew what I wanted to do."

With a clear natural artistic talent and a childhood which, thanks to his father's job as a Cathay Pacific pilot, saw him inspired by some of the world's most architecturally rich places, Nick completed an undergraduate degree at Glasgow School of Art's renowned Mackintosh School of Architecture, then returned to Hong Kong →



LE PEEP BOUTIQUE



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→ to work at a regional office of Rotterdam's Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA).

"It was a really exciting start up," he explains. "It was set up by six students from [Dutch architect, urbanist and professor] Rem Koolhaas's Harvard class. This really inspired me to do the same. I went to the Architectural Association to finish my studies and then set up Data Nature Associates [later to become Nick Leith-Smith Architecture + Design] in 2000 with Kristina Blahnik, who was a classmate at the time. My first commission was my parents' barn conversion, and I haven't looked back since."

In 2003, when the practice was still in its infancy, Nick received a career-defining commission from Kristina's uncle, shoe icon Manolo Blahnik, who tasked him with

"The latest shop is in the fifth-floor Shoe Heaven of London department store Harrods, a 42,000 square foot salon dedicated to fine footwear"

designing an exhibition for the brand at London's Design Museum. It was a great success, and led to a long-standing creative partnership between Nick's firm and Blahnik's brand, which has seen him design more than twenty Blahnik stores, including those in Hong Kong and Dublin which opened at the end of 2015.

"The creative process in the fashion industry has always fascinated me," Nick says. "Fashion moves at such a pace and designers are always looking for the next inspiration for their collection, working sometimes two years in advance. As soon as the collection is made, that is done and

dusted and the next collection cycle begins. It's been a privileged experience creating architecture and interiors for this industry, and I've been able to observe how Manolo masterfully fuses ideas, muses, cultures and manufacturing techniques to create shoe sculpture. I've used this insight to evolve his retail brand so that every regional shop is different. Through discussion and then images, the starting point is always to develop a visual dialogue. This could be a film, an artist or a specific vernacular architecture that is his reference to the specific location. These shops become installations based on these references where we design everything down to the furniture and bespoke display systems."

The latest shop is in the fifth-floor Shoe Heaven of legendary London department store Harrods, a 42,000 square foot salon dedicated to fine footwear, with a separate raised demi-floor in the West Tower dedicated entirely to Manolo Blahnik.

"It's a bright beautiful space with two elevations made up of three large arch-topped windows," Nick explains, his enthusiasm for his craft almost tangible. "We wanted to create a grand salon feel enhanced by these proportions, so we added a coffered ceiling to echo the bays of the windows, and from these hung custom-designed brass and silk shades. The starting point for inspiration on this shop was the architect and decorator Josef Hoffmann, one of the leading proponents of European Art Nouveau, and particularly his use of refined geometry and monotonous; so we contradicted this concept with bold-coloured upholstery and matching lampshades."

So far the shop has been nominated for a retail design award and garnered much praise for its innovative style and playful ethos, so it's fair to say that Nick's



LOUIS KAHN'S NATIONAL PARLIAMENT HOUSE IN BANGLADESH, JATIYO SANGSAD BHABAN



MANOLO BLAHNIK
STORE AT HARRODS



painstakingly reasoned design approach has not gone unappreciated.

Nevertheless, while Manolo Blahnik may be Nick's most high-profile client, he is of course one of many, each of them requiring the use of a different string from Nick's diverse bow. He recently finished work on an apartment in London's exclusive Grosvenor Square, managing every aspect of the project, including the full refurbishment of the space, plus all the furniture and furnishings. The company designed bespoke items, including kitchen, fireplace, headboards, benches and vanity desks, as →

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→ well as designing and manufacturing backlit floating side tables with integrated wall mirrors, and a pair of wall lamps in bronze and onyx for the hallway. The crowning glory, however, was the frameless glass wall and with its full height doors and bronze portal frames dividing the hallway and living spaces – a true statement feature.

Calling on a very different skill set, another recent residential project for Nick and his team involved the refurbishment of a 1950s house in Kensington with a new-build rear extension. The extension, which covered the full width of the house, transformed its entire ground floor and created extensive LA-style lateral living spaces with frameless glazed openings and flush floor finishes to connect the inside with the courtyard garden.

“In a similar way to the fashion industry, often my favourite project is the one I am working on or just finished,” Nick says, “and I like working with clients who have a clear vision of what they want to achieve with their project. You might think that would be limiting, but it actually gives me more creative freedom as it means we can focus our energy evolving the brief and concept around their vision. Last year we designed Le Peep Boutique, a membership bar and nightclub which just opened in Mayfair. This was an example of the client having a strong initial vision which meant that we worked together to create the overall identity and concept behind the brand and then transformed it into reality.”

Nick is inspired by many of the world’s great buildings, but particularly admires the work of the late American architect Louis Kahn – specifically one of his most famous works, the striking National Parliament House in Bangladesh, Jatiyo Sangsad Bhaban, and the lesser-known Esherick House, a one-bedroom, flat-roof box house in Philadelphia famous for its spatial



organisation and for the ventilation and natural lighting provided by its unusual window-and-shutter configuration.

“I believe great buildings can be spiritually inspiring and have a sense of place that is akin to a dramatic landscape,” Nick explains. “And Khan was really a master at this, creating exceptional monumental modernism.”

I can well see the influence of Khan’s ethos on Nick’s own creations, and there seems a particularly strong truth in his use of the word ‘spiritual’: there is, without doubt, something spiritually stirring about a really great piece of design or architecture – be it big or small – that we can’t help but respond to as human beings. And if you’re still not convinced after a glance at Nick’s work, but have a penchant for shoes, a quick tour of the Manolo Blahnik stores he’s created should be more than enough to change your mind. 📍

(nickleithsmith.com)