

# NeoCon East Keynotes Deliver Dose of Design

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS INCLUDED MARC KUSHNER, CO-FOUNDER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF ARCHITIZER AND PARTNER OF THE NEW YORK ARCHITECTURE FIRM HWKN AND AYSE BIRSEL CO-FOUNDER OF BIRSEL + SECK, AN INNOVATIVE DESIGN STUDIO IN NEW YORK CITY.

WORDS BY TODD HARDY



**NeoCon East attendees learned architecture and design is a push and pull between the comfortable and innovative, and the design brain needs to be exercised to work to its full potential. Those were the messages from two design stars who gave keynote presentations at the event last week in Philadelphia.**

The speakers were Marc Kushner, co-founder and chief executive officer of Architizer and partner of the New York architecture firm HWKN, and Ayse Birsel co-founder of Birsel + Seck, an innovative design studio in New York City.

Kushner, who spoke on the first day of the event, took attendees through a short history of the patterns and cycles of architectural design. He also explained the importance of combining technology and architecture.

The design of buildings will typically follow a cyclical pattern as the pendulum of design swings between stable design — such as the U.S. Supreme Court Building patterned after the Greek Parthenon, a symbolism of strength and comfort — and the desire for the architects to push innovation and possibly the comfort of those who live in the community and use the building, Kushner said.

The pendulum swings back between the two extremes. An example of architects pushing innovation happened in the 1970s with the decade's experimentation with brutalism. Brutalism was all about concrete; it included small windows and dehumanizing scale. In response to the experimentation, the pendulum was pushed back in the 1980s to forms that were more comfortable with columns, but also with updated materials.

It takes years for a building to be designed and built, and many more buildings will be designed and built before the architects will receive feedback on

the success of the innovation, Kushner said. In the meantime, hundreds of undesirable buildings could be designed and built. It is this period that determines how quickly the pendulum swings between unacceptable innovation and when the general public is comfortable with buildings.

An example of a dramatic decrease in the amount of time it took for the pendulum to swing between innovation and what people were comfortable with happened with the opening in 1997 of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry, a building with beautifully blended shapes and curves. For the first time innovation was accepted by critics, academics and the general public. With the advances in technology, the design was viewed and shared around the world. Everyone wanted a similar design in their community. The feedback was so rapid no longer did it take years to find out if a push in innovation was accepted or if the architects needed to go back to the drawing board.

With further advances in technology, the pendulum continues to swing back and forth faster and faster. Current technology has been able to bring together what the public is comfortable with and the innovation architects are striving for even faster. With the use of computer renderings as new buildings are designed, the buildings can be shared and viewed with the masses, giving the community the opportunity to not only speak out about the innovative designs, but perhaps more importantly begin to internalize the design, Kushner said. The new building becomes part of the community before the first shovel of dirt is turned over at the groundbreaking. This prevents surprises. The renderings are shared around the world. When the building opens it is not just an edifice. It is now media.

Birsel was the keynote on the second day. Born in Turkey, Birsel comes from a family of lawyers and



*Marc Kushner, co-founder and chief executive officer of Architizer*



*Ayse Birsal co-founder of Birsal + Seck*

thought she would become one, too. As a child she loved to draw and was shown the design that goes into a simple tea cup and saucer: the curve of the cup to fit the mouth, the handle to keep from burning your hands and the saucer to keep drips from staining the tablecloth. That experience changed her life and started her on the path to becoming a product designer.

Birsal feels it is important to regularly give your brain signals to create something. Those who attended her keynote were given the opportunity to give their brain that signal at the beginning of the address by drawing the face of the

person sitting next to them (which can be a very scary proposition for someone with little to no artistic skills). As the creative signal was sent to the brain of the attendee, many became more comfortable. Birsal said being creative is something everyone should do on a regular basis to use that part of their brain.

Birsal encourages people to apply the steps of design to their lives. This idea, as many of hers do, began as an experiment. She wanted to see if the design process could be used to improve the lives we live, and it led to her book “Design the Life You Love.”

The first step for improving

life by design is to “deconstruct” by taking a look at your life and breaking it down into parts. This may appear to be a simple exercise, but as you start to deconstruct you find parts that can be further deconstructed until you get down to the simplest individual components.

The next step is to use a different point of view to look at the pieces of your life. Think of someone who is a hero to you or who you look up to. Consider their qualities, and you will find you have those same qualities, Birsal said. Use these qualities as you consider the next step: reconstruction.

In reconstruction you create a new hierarchy, and typically a life will not go back together the same. Not everything will be put back, some pieces may even be eliminated. This will help you sort out what is essential and what you can do without as you design the life you love.

The fourth step is expression, giving your reconstruction form and creating a sum that is larger than all your parts. Birsal recommends creating a vision map of who you are to redraw yourself as to what you now represent with all the parts made up in the reconstruction.

The final step is to create the prototype, to give your new life a try and see how it works. “Ordinary people are extraordinarily creative” and “life is our biggest product,” Birsal said, adding that once reconstructed we will find we no longer need the road maps to life we were given and instead can design our own.. **BoF**