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A Holistic Approach TO DESIGN

Joy Chao, the lead interior designer at JHA, discusses inspiration, technology and facing fresh challenges in the future

WRITTEN BY **JOSH WALKER** | INTERVIEW BY **MARC CASTALDO**

Whether commercial or residential, renovation or new build, local or international, all projects are bespoke, catering to a client's desires within the project's context, resulting in thoughtfully crafted spaces for life

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MONTGOMERY SISAM ARCHITECTS

JHA offers an esthetically pleasing blend of Eastern and Western design elements that enhance a space's functionality

Joy Chao, Lead Interior Designer of John Henshaw Architect Inc.

When asked how she would describe her work, Joy Chao uses the words "simple and tactile." Chao has a passion for keeping things uncomplicated but still layered, and despite recent changes in technology, "It's always very two-dimensional," she says. "We used to look at photographs and magazines — now we look at images on social media."

It's not uncommon for a client to approach her with a reference image that's impressive but open for Chao to layer with tactile experiences. "It could be the texture of wood or fabrics, stone, marble or just how you finish surfaces."

Chao is lead interior designer at John Henshaw Architect (JHA), an award-winning interdisciplinary architectural and interior design firm based in Vancouver. Its portfolio of projects ranges from contemporary condos to cosy family homes. Her partner and husband, John Henshaw, is its principal architect. Bringing both an architectural and interior design perspective, Chao says their approach to projects is holistic.

Naturally, it's not just texture and tactility that play into a project, and Chao notes that there are other elements at work. That can include a client's budget or planning how you're going to effectively set up a space.

"Lifestyle is always a big concern," she says. "Are they single, or are they a family with children? Is it multigenerational?" Lighting is another concern, and Chao needs to think about how much natural light enters the space and how that light will alter it.

Naturally, with exposure to different projects, clients and influences, Chao is someone who is constantly learning. "I learn new things every day," she says. "New technologies, new ways of doing things, new ways of dealing with people. ... We all have the capacity to learn, and I'm constantly surprised by how many new things I learn every day."

And she observes that inspiration can come from anywhere, not just her work. "I like to travel and try to do so at least twice a year," she says. "I'm always inspired by my surroundings when I travel and learn new things from people around me." That continues into Chao's daily life, where she can take something from the food she eats, the clothes she's wearing or a new technology she encounters.

Naturally, building a notable design firm and becoming respected in the industry isn't easy, and Chao is honest in noting that setbacks can be instrumental to success. "I think mistakes define you as an interior designer," Chao says. "I don't think anyone is perfect. Inevitably, we will make mistakes. It's how we learn from them and make the next project better."

She adds that the best advice she's received is being told to be open-minded and willing to learn something new. "That's the best advice I've received and what I'd give to anybody."

Chao shares that she wants to see the firm continue to expand in the next 15 to 20 years, and hopes that both she and her team will keep working on great projects — and experiencing new challenges — as it does so.

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