

Shashi Caan

the idealist

For Shashi Caan, design has never been about the flashiest materials, styles, or tools. "I'm one of those people who really needs to find a much deeper meaning in things," she says. "It's hard for me to be a trend-based designer. I don't believe that's appropriate for living environments."

Throughout her 18 years in the industry at some of New York City's most prominent firms, Caan has made her mark with an understated style that uses multiple layers to unite architectural, industrial, and interior design. While her style has gained her admiration, it also goes against the current time-is-money attitude of a soft economy. "I think that given our time frames and our financial constraints, today it's become very difficult to focus on creativity. We have, I believe, in our professional practice refined the process to where I don't think it's possible to do that anymore," she says.

Instead of bowing to financial or other constraints on creativity, however, Caan chose to redesign the system. "I made some bold moves personally," she says of her decision to leave her position as associate design director at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and open her own firm, Shashi Caan Collective. "Giving up the high-power corporate position was a difficult choice for me to make," she says. The rewards, however, have long banished any doubts she may have had.

Since opening the firm in May 2002, Caan has focused on creating a new business model that not only allows time for creativity, but encourages and fosters it. "Fundamentally, it's about the designer first and foremost," she says. "We can be responsive to our clients if our design is fresh. You can't do that if a full-time designer has to juggle six, eight, or 10 projects."

At the Collective, designers work on projects as they are available, meaning they tackle one project at a time and take on another project only when ready to do so. In order to make this work, Caan maintains a very large outreach, pulling in the appropriate talents for each project. In focusing on each project, she believes designers can truly identify the needs of the client, which makes for the best design. "I think designed objects and spaces really need to service the person they are designed for," she says. "The human being or company or group that is engaged really needs to be the center of attention."

This focus on creativity is something she is now advocating in her new position as director of interior design at Parson's School of Design in New York. "I decided to do it because there are such parallels with the Collective. It's part of our mission to have a curriculum that would further research and a knowledge base about reinforcing creativity and the art of design for future generations," she says, noting that her time now is equally divided between the Collective and Parsons. But she notes, "First and foremost my interest is in design."

Her overall goal, she says, is to make a difference. "If I could make a little bit of a difference in the quality of life that's supported with all of our environments, it would be that the human being is made to feel confident and comfortable," she says. "My work is about supporting people and if I can accomplish that and it inadvertently makes for better communities and quality of life, I'll have accomplished what I need to do." ■

