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Episode 57: Jeffrey Beers

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Prolific designer and architect [Jeffrey Beers](#), who recently celebrated his namesake firm's 35th anniversary, grew up traveling the world with his parents, which instilled in him a love of hospitality and design—a skill he honed under a who's who of mentors, including Dale Chihuly, Oscar Niemeyer, and I.M. Pei. Bar Lui, his claim to fame, had the distinction of being the longest bar in Manhattan when it was created. But Beers' talents go beyond design. He is also known for glassblowing, what he describes as a creative counterpoint to the rigors of architecture. For the self-described rebel entrepreneur, his passion for the industry is as present today as it was more than three decades ago, cementing his legacy as one of the forefathers of hospitality design today.

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Stacy Shoemaker Rauen: Hi, I'm here with JB:. Jeffrey, thanks so much for joining me today.

Jeffrey Beers: Hi, Stacy. I'm thrilled to join you today. Thank you very much for inviting me.

SSR: It's so good to see you. Even if it's over Zoom, it's still very good to see you.

JB: It's great to see you, Stacy. Are you well?

SSR: Good.

JB: Boys are good?

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SSR: Boys are good. Thank you.

JB: Nice one.

SSR: We always start at the beginning. Where did you grow up?

JB: Well, I grew up right here in New York. I was almost born here. But we moved here when I was about 5 years old. I grew up in Manhattan. We lived all over the city and many different neighborhoods. I'm a New Yorker, for sure. I'm right here. Not born, but bred.

SSR: Your parents, they were both in the travel business, right? How did that influence you in your career path?

JB: They did, very much so. I'm an only child. It's just me. My parents were both entrepreneurs really at heart. My mom was in the destination management business, which really is hospitality for all intents and purposes. She would handle conventions when they would come into the city and take them on tours all over, book restaurants. But my father was into travel business. He was in advertising. He would run incentive programs, and we would travel together pretty much all over the world. As a kid, I remember when I was, gosh, even back to 11 years old, traveling to Europe with them and various parts of the world.

It gave me a great influence, obviously, from the hotels we stayed in. We would eat in restaurants ever since I could remember as a young kid. They dragged me along. Sure enough, I learned a lot about the restaurant business, about ordering off a menu, and staying in a hotel. It was tremendously fortunate, really. I was exposed, obviously, to not only people and architecture and hospitality, but lifestyles and different cultures. As a young kid, it was pretty cool. I didn't know it really at the time.

SSR: Yeah. Sounds pretty amazing. The furthest I got was Myrtle Beach. No offense to Myrtle Beach.

JB: I know. It's really weird. I don't mean it in any way other than it just happened.

SSR: Do you have one favorite memory or trip or place or something that really stuck with you throughout your life?

JB: Well, yes, I do. I think I was maybe 14 and my dad ran a travel incentive program for, I think, it was maybe 150 or 180 executives and their spouses to go to Rome. He chartered two 707 back in the '70s in the day. I was the official photographer, basically, for the group. I'm 14 years old. I remember being in Rome and staying at the Hassler Hotel. I mean, it was really quite remarkable. I'll never forget that trip actually—just at that age to be exposed to travel like that. Of course, a city like Rome and, gosh, it was probably 1972. I don't know, 1970. I don't know. It was remarkable. I'll never forget it, among many others, not just Europe.



Capiz Lounge in the Renaissance Boston Waterfront Hotel. *Photo by Sean Litchfield*

SSR: You said you're the photographer. Did you always have a love of design where you creative from a young age? Talk to me a little bit about how you ended up going the way you did.

JB: Yeah, I did. I mean, that probably started it for me. Obviously, doing all of that travel and being included with my mom and dad. We would go out to restaurants five days, five nights a week. My mom was not the cook. It was maybe my dad. But he was the grill man, and we would mostly go out to restaurants. God, I was 12, 13 years old and we would be in New York City. My dad loved Chinese food. Back then, Chinese was a big deal, and it was really great. We'd be in Mr. Chow's or Shun Lee and I'm 13 or 14. It was just fantastic. I mean many, many other restaurants turned me on. I was tall for my age. Back then, there weren't any rules and I'm just going to say I was really tall, and at 16, I think I got a job as a busboy and then a waiter in high school and worked at restaurants at a young age in Manhattan. This was back when it was a little different time.

SSR: Right.

JB: It really turned me on to the hospitality world.

SSR: Love it. Did you end up going into studying design at school?

JB: I did. I also met a good friend of mine who is an architecture student at Pratt when I was about 15 or 16. I became very good friends with him. He really turned me on the Zip-A-Tone and colors and planning and taught me how to draw and draft, in other words. But at one point, I decided that my high school wasn't planned right. It didn't look right. It was claustrophobic. It was small. I redesigned the school. I created an independent project and redesigned Collegiate School, actually, on the Upper West Side.

SSR: Nice.

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JB: I presented it to the headmaster. In fact, he had me then present it to the board. Next thing I knew, I said, 'You know, I want to be an architect. I mean, I dig this,' and hospitality was part of it, too. I was lucky enough to—obviously, we'll go on to talk about my experience with I.M. Pei, but I did a lot of hotels with him. Anyway, that's how it started. I just really got into it. Redesigning Collegiate was really a good start.

SSR: They actually implemented your designs or what happened that year?

JB: Not really, I mean, there were some ideas there. The school has recently moved, as you know, or we were on West 77th Street at the time. This was again back in the '70s. The school was on 77th Street between 77, 78, between Broadway and West End. It's now moved to 62nd Street, I think, or 61st in a new building. But it was a lot of fun. It was a lot of fun. The headmaster loved it, the board loved it. They were like, 'This is really great,' so many ideas.

SSR: They're like, 'Who is this kid? Where did he come from?'

JB: Something like that. But I was a little bit of a rebel entrepreneur even at 16.

SSR: You've worked for some amazing people before launching your own firm, Dale Chihuly, as you mentioned, I.M. Pei. How did you end up with some of these great masters as mentors and teachers. I guess Dale was the first one, correct?

JB: Yeah. Dale was the first one. I was in my sophomore year, beginning of my sophomore year at RISD, the Rhode Island School Design. They were rebuilding the architecture building. It started sophomore year. They put us in basically the sculpture building in temporary studios. I was down the hall from the glass lab. Of course, I'd be drawing all night long and couldn't see straight after.

I take walks down the hall at three o'clock in the morning or whatever. But there would be Dale and his incredible troupe of amazing artists and glassblowers. The most incredible color, beautiful things were being made. There was a team. It was a symphony. It was a rock band. There were 10 people maybe making this amazing work. I was enthralled. I was enamored with it.

I met Dale. We became really close and fast friends. He invited me to join him, and I did. I really wanted to learn glassblowing. I actually became a really good glassblower. He invited me to work on his teams. As a little sideline to my architecture studies, I was a glassblower with Dale. He just was amazing. I mean, he was absolutely amazing. He has probably the most amazing color sense of anyone I've ever met in my life. His sense of form and color patterning is remarkable. He probably taught me the most about teamwork also. He works as a Venetian Murano team, as a team, and the group would produce amazing work.

SSR: It's amazing. Glassblowing has been something you've kept going. It's still something you enjoy doing. You still do it on the side and you do it for some products, right?

JB: Yes. I actually taught glassblowing at Urban Glass many, many years ago. This was quite a long time ago. But I'm one of the founding board members of Urban Glass, which is a facility in Brooklyn in New York. It's a 20,000-square-foot glassmaking facility. I often blow there. It's my Zen. It's my ballet. It allows me creative thought. I can explore not only form and certain forms we want to explore, but it's really where I get my creative juices going. It's very spontaneous. It's a spontaneous creative endeavor. For me, it's my Zen.

SSR: You went to RISD, obviously, such a well-respected school. Did it help cement your love for design and architecture? How did that help you find where you wanted to go from there?

JB: Well, RISD did. I loved that school for many reasons. It was not just an architecture school. My best friends were apparel designers and painters and sculptors. It's really a design school in the truest sense. It's not just an architecture school. To that end, I mean, glassblowing, for me, it became a creative counterpoint to the discipline of architecture, the rigor of architecture. It put a lot of warmth and emotion. For me, it gave me a spontaneity that I don't think architecture really gives. Architecture is such a rigorous discipline; you have to be very disciplined. Glass is very different—exploring art and painting and glassblowing is very different than that.

SSR: Where did you go after college? What was your first job out of college?

JB: Well, I was lucky enough to receive a Fulbright Fellowship to go to Brazil. I received a Fulbright to work on a thesis for the integration of art and architecture. Brazil was my country. In fact, I was on my way to interview Oscar Niemeyer for my thesis. I had lined up an interview with him. My Portuguese is about as good as his English at that point at that time. He asked me, I think he basically wondering if I wanted a job. He asked me if I wanted a job. In a nanosecond said, 'Absolutely.' He said, 'Okay. See you Monday morning.' The next thing I knew, I was working for Oscar Niemeyer in Rio de Janeiro. I spent about a year working in his office. That was my first job.

SSR: Not a bad first job.

JB: Yeah. It was just amazing. I absolutely couldn't believe it. It was a wonderful experience living in Rio and, obviously at 25 or 24, or whatever I was, 23. [It wasn't] bad. In fact, Brazil taught me quite a lot. Living in that country and working with him. I think I took away so much about warmth and people and hospitality—the essence of hospitality. For me, it's about the music and about people and being warm and inviting. That country is all about art.



SSR: Yeah. What made you decide to leave that position?

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JB: Actually, I decided that I'd spent a year there. I relocated to Sao Paulo. I worked for an architect there, Ruy Ohtake, who is very, very accomplished in concrete, and sort of a Japanese-meets-Brazilian way of working. I was really inspired by that and his use of glass. But I then got to a point where I said, 'I got to really get back to reality here. This has been a lot of fun.' But I wanted to get back to New York and resume my career, my ideas of what I wanted to do.

I joined the firm of I.M. Pei & Partners when I returned to New York. I was very excited. It was a wonderful opportunity. I went looking for a job, and I went after it. I went up to their office. I actually called one of the partners from, back then, a pay phone from the street when I was on my job search. Again, 25 or 24 whatever it was. Anyway, he said, 'Okay. Okay. Come up. Come up. I'll talk to you.'

SSR: You were outside the building?

JB: Well, yeah, I was down the street. One way or another we ... it was great. He said, 'Absolutely. We'd love you to join the firm. Show up Monday. Come on Monday morning.' I started an eight-year long tenure at I.M.'s office, too. But I.M. was amazing. I.M. Pei, he taught me really about not only use of space and proportion and detail and modern tailoring. I mean, he was a consummate modernist. My interest in glass really drew me to I.M. Pei's office, of course, with his experience with curtain walls. I.M. was really one of the forerunners of curtain wall design. At this point, I was really focusing on my architecture career. I wanted glass to be a big part of it. What firm could I look for better than I.M. Pei to learn about the architectural use of glass, especially in high rise building design?

But I think the most important thing that he really taught me was actually how to handle clients. I.M. was the most amazing diplomat. I remember being with him in a boardroom. We were doing work at Mount Sinai Hospital. I went with him on a presentation. He was in front of 30 board members of Mount Sinai. Oh my gosh. We were over budget. He was over budget. It started one way. But 30 minutes, 45 minutes later, they were all saying, 'How much do you need? We'll write check.' I just couldn't believe how amazing he was with clients and with everyone, just a consummate diplomat, but an incredibly tailored, modern architect with great attention to material and detail.

SSR: What kind of projects did you work on with him or was there one that stuck out as a great learning experience?

JB: Yeah. I spent quite a bit in Singapore. I worked on the Raffles City Hotel. This was in the early '80s in Singapore. Not the old Raffles, the new Raffles City Complex. This was a series of hotel towers and office towers and podiums. I think I was lucky enough to exhibit a bit of a flair for public spaces. The next thing I knew, he was asking me to design the porte-cocheres and work on not only the curtain walls, but a lot of the public spaces of the hotel. Then numerous other projects with him that really revolved around public space. I learned a lot from that. I learned a great deal.

SSR: As a young designer, architect at these amazing, different firms from I.M. Pei to Oscar to Dale, was there any time that—we always talk on this part that you learn more from your mistakes than you do your successes—was there ever something that you remember doing or part of the project that you wish you could have a do-over but it stuck with you?

JB: I don't know about the do over part. But I think I wish I was a bit more open, open to taking it all in. I think I was on a bit of a mission. Maybe we all are at that age. We're on this mission. I wish in some ways I had taken it all in or slowed down a little bit. Not been on such a fast track.

SSR: Why did you decide to go off on your own? When did you have that inkling to start your own firm and the courage to step out of such an amazing firm and do it on your own?

JB: Stacy, that is interesting. I had always wanted and desired to have my own firm. It was definitely always in my mind. My parents, both being entrepreneurs and having their own businesses. It obviously was in my DNA. It's how I'm wired. While I was even at I.M.'s office, I was aspiring to at some point, figure out a way or at least to have my own company. We would all entertain a residential project or two that I would do personally and for friends or acquaintances or whatever. But really, there was an opportunity that presented itself for me. I recently returned from Singapore for a long stint there and was on a vacation out east. I met a restaurateur out at a party out east, and he said, 'Well, I'm thinking of leasing a space in the city as a restaurateur and would you come in and take a look at it? You can come in just for the day.'

I said, 'Of course, I'd be happy to.' Well, that led to my designing the Bar Lui. It was my first restaurant project. I designed it and built it and it was a wonderful, wonderful project. I'm happy and proud to say it was published in 17 magazines. In 1985, it was a really great project. I can elaborate more on it later. But it opened the door for me for lots of different reasons. My phone started ringing a lot.

I remember walking in and thinking I am out and having a coffee and just saying, 'I have this opportunity. It's really amazing to me, although I really I'm torn.' But he was the most supportive, encouraging and supportive person in my life. In fact, I know Didi and Sandy, his sons very well—God bless him. He supported me. He said, 'Absolutely, if you're going to hang a shingle on your door, you go after it.' He was very, very supportive. Basically said, 'If you trip up or something, anytime the door is open here.' He couldn't be more supportive. That gave me the courage. I remember telling my dad and he was like, 'Okay. You go.'

SSR: 'You do this.'

JB: Something like that. Yeah. My mom was even more, like, kicking me out the door.

SSR: Did you stay in touch with I.M. throughout your career?

JB: Yes, I did. Absolutely. I mean, he was 102, I think, when he passed. Oscar Niemeyer was 104.

SSR: Wow.

JB: You believe? I mean, I don't know.

SSR: What are they drinking? What did they drink? Yeah.

JB: What is it with you architects? Okay. I don't know. God bless.

SSR: Yeah.

JB: Yes. I stayed in touch with him all the way through his 90s. Again, his two sons I know very well. In fact, when he turned 100, I sent a bottle of champagne to him. I got a call from one of his son's going, 'You're giving a champagne to my father at 100? Are you crazy?' Jokingly, jokingly, of course. He was thrilled. He was absolutely thrilled. They're good friends and the family is an amazing family.



Suviche restaurant in the One&Only Palmilla in Cabo San Lucas

SSR: Amazing. Love that. Okay. Yes. You hinted at Bar Lui. But it had the distinction of being the longest restaurant in Manhattan or the longest bar. What was the actual distinction? Tell us how that came to be and why you think that was so well received in 1985?

JB: Yeah. Well, Stacy, when I came into the city to look at the space, the space was 33 feet wide by 200 feet long. It spanned from Broadway to Mercer Street between Houston and Bleecker. This space was absolutely unique and challenging in that respect. If you can imagine a block-long space, but only 33 feet wide. Any restaurateur, perhaps all of us would be like, 'Well, okay, how am I going to make a restaurant under this spot?' I immediately responded to him with a huge smile, because he was really looking at me like, 'What do I do here?' I said, 'You're going to build a bar. You're going to build the longest bar in New York.' Phil Scotty was the restaurateur. God bless him. He's a good friend and he owns P.J. Clarke's restaurant now among many others. I think he's partners in Serafina.

I said, 'We're going to build a bar from Broadway to Mercer. We're going to build the longest bar in New York. We're going to put a diner open kitchen and I want to do it in glass in the middle of it.' This thing is going to operate like a diner/bar slash ... I don't know, New York, because he was really into sound and music. I was glassblowing a lot then. I personally blew 35 wall sconces in pinks and blues and lavenders. I painted the whole place in a silver blue. The bar was made out of glass and a rubber bumper was the bar face and the bar top was glass.

It was just Miami Vice time where pinks and blues and strong colors were hot. He put a sound system in there to die for. The thing basically turned into not only a restaurant—it worked really well as a restaurant—but it was also a club. In the 1985, clubs were different then. I'll call this a performance restaurant. It really took off. I mean, there were literally club lines out the door. His food was great. The food was great. Everybody was abuzz about it. It just was a wonderful project. It gained so much momentum. It was a lot of fun. Everyone had a lot of fun.

SSR: That proves what you can do with a challenge, right?

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JB: Yeah. It just was an amazing project that it really hit the right moment at the right time, all of us did. Phil and I and his partners hit it right on the money. I really enjoy developing the concept. The concept is really important to me. Working with whoever owns it and operates it. Why are we doing this? Why is it going to look the way it does? What are the goals here? What are we trying to achieve? Maybe not even that literally just underneath it all.

SSR: Right. Is that your favorite part of the process? Is that beginning, understanding?

JB: Definitely. I really enjoy understanding the narrative and, obviously, the DNA is the *raison d'être* or *parti* of the project. But it's always really inspiring and encouraging to me. Therefore, then the whole team in the studio to really wrap our arms around the project and from a passionate standpoint that we really understand not only our desire—well, our desires are the owners' desires. I mean, we're trying to accomplish a successful hotel or restaurant or even residential projects have bits and pieces of that, that are that are all about the owner of the residence. But in hospitality, it's key. I love that part of it, the branding part, the narrative part.

SSR: Right. Now you celebrated 35 years this year?

JB: Yeah, we did. We did. I'm excited. I'm excited. Sometimes I wonder whether that's a good thing or not, or whatever. Well, the studio is just so full of so many young energy and young energetic people before the lockdown, of course. But everybody stayed, and everybody continues to bring a lot of energy and youthful energy to the firm. It helps me be young, and it keeps me. But they want my energy. They want my energy from what I just described. It really feeds on one another. The firm has got a lot of interesting attribute and breath to it.

SSR: Yeah. Okay. Bar Lui gets you on the map. You start taking on other projects. Would you consider that your big break, or were there others along the way that even propelled your firm even more than that one did?

JB: Well, that was probably the start of it. I was doing a number of residential projects then. Luckily, we're published. There was some publicity going on, which of course, when you're starting out, it's very important. But Bar Lui really led to China Grill. China Grill was an amazing adventure, with Jeffrey Chodorow. I did eight of them all over the world with Jeff. It was that energy—Rumjungle was another one. I think it was '96 or something that we did that. It was the beginning of ... there weren't really clubs, as we know big giant clubs then. This was a restaurant like Bar Lui. I drew on a lot of my Bar Lui passion and experience. Really, it's a restaurant, but then it becomes more than that. It's what I call a performance restaurant. We added all things as the night went on. Buddha Bar was doing the same thing in Paris. It was a very interesting concept. That energy, Stacy, is what where my big breaks were and what really catapulted me into the world of, not only restaurant design but nightclub design and hospitality on a dynamic level.

SSR: It must have been an exciting era of hospitality, too, in the '80s and '90s. I mean, just thinking about it, it was you and David Rockwell and Adam Tihany and Tony Chi. I mean, you guys are redefining what hospitality meant, what restaurants meant.

JB: Very much so, Stacy. Thank you for saying that. I mean, yes, we were all and are still very good friends and not only contemporaries but colleagues, we've worked together. David and I've worked on projects and Adam Tihany, Tony Chi and I are very good friends. Adam was very much in the really the beginning of it. I'm trying to remember Sam Lapada was one of the original restaurant designers that I think inspired us all. I never got to know Sam that well. But Sam was an amazing designer. It was a time when that was being embraced. Wolfgang Puck was really coming online with, obviously, Chinois On Main.

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Wolfgang's whole attitude toward California and Asian cuisine. It was a very interesting time to be in the restaurant design business. Design became a huge component of the success. It wasn't just the dining room anymore.

SSR: Right.

JB: It was a whole lot more.

SSR: Looking back and starting your firm. Was there anything you wish you knew then that you know now?

JB: Ha. Wow. What a great question. Gosh. There's so many things I wish I knew then. Now, there's so many things I wish I didn't know, to tell you the truth. I often say to my team, 'I'm sorry. I know too much.' Because I got to let him go, I have to let him go. I know, obviously, a lot. But yes. Back then, of course, I would have loved to have known operations a lot more than I know it now and how really the business of restaurants work.

I am partners in eight restaurants right now. I've been on the other side of the table and written the checks and understand how it all works. But the business is a fascinating business from a hospitality standpoint, and also culinarily every which way. Back then I learned everything I was learning. I had a huge appetite for really how restaurants worked.

Bar Lui actually was a very interesting experience. The builder who became a very good friend of mine, his name was Michael Parlamis. He was a restaurant builder. God bless him, passed away a number of years ago. But his dad built diners all over New York, all over the Bronx. He'd been building restaurants for many, many years. But he said, 'Look, when you do a restaurant, we're going to go to the basement first. We're going to go down to the basement and we're going to see how we get exhaust out of here and where's the grease traps going. Is there enough storage and cooking and then on to are there enough waiter stations? Is there enough support? What's the flow? What's the circulation?' All that good stuff that is really important. It's very important to a successful restaurant. I, of course, was obsessed with my glass bar and my glass diner kitchen, which is fabulous.

SSR: Restaurants and bars are where you started and your passion. But you have obviously expanded into many amazing hotels. Is there one project that you think has defined your firm of recent or even a bit ago that really speaks to what you and your team at JB: International tries to create?

JB: For sure. Well, Stacey, I mean, that's a wonderful question to ask. I certainly starting out in the restaurant world and from China Grills to Las Vegas. I worked with Daniel Boulud on many of his restaurants. But I think the Cove at Atlantis, I worked with dear Sol Kerzner, an amazing man, an incredible visionary and hotelier. God bless him, passed away a year last year or the year before. But I think the Cove at Atlantis, we designed that property as well as maybe the Fontainebleau was really a great experience. Doing the 40/40 Club for Jay-Z, we recently did his offices, Roc Nation here in Manhattan.



Roc Nation offices in New York

SSR: What was that like? Have you done many offices?

JB: We've done, well, maybe over 10 now, 10, 12 offices. Yeah. We've done a number of different law firms, the hedge firms and different types of firms that are looking for a high-design element. They're looking for a design element that's a 'wow' factor. Jay-Z's Roc Nation's offices were amazing. I mean, they were really a lot of fun to do. Jay is an incredible visionary. His art collection is beyond belief. We really designed it as a residential, Jay's residential mansion world. Very warm, very inviting, very hospitality-driven, lots of arts, great lighting. It was a great project.

SSR: Was he hands on?

JB: Yes and no, of course. He's touring all night.

SSR: He's a busy man.

JB: Touring a lot. His CEO, Desiree Perez, is an amazing woman. I'm lucky enough to be designing her residence and her home now. I worked with her extensively. She really has a great eye. Her husband, Juan Perez is amazing. We had a really great time together and continue to.

SSR: Awesome. All right. Sorry. I cut you off about the hotel.

JB: Well, we started really with a hotel called the Dillon back. I can't remember, sometime in the early 2000s. It was Midtown on 40th Street off Park Avenue. That was a really interesting foray into a boutique hotel design. I really enjoyed working on that. It then led to other properties, for Hilton and for Marriott. We then did a Renaissance recently on 33rd Street, which is really a wonderful property for Marriott. Then resort properties. We did the Atlantis recently, the Atlantis in China in Sanya, which was a huge project. Very exciting. It was BBG—it was Brennan Beer Gorman—who were the architects for the

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Atlantis in Sanya. We did all the interiors. There were probably 40 different room types. The building is shaped like a shark fin. Every floor decreases by about a foot and a half in width. At the end of the day, out of 1,200 rooms, 1,000 of them or 900 of them are different shapes and different sizes.

It became an absolute monster of a project to work on, but I'm very proud of it. We've got 40 different room types in that hotel. There are many, many different restaurants and, obviously, all the activities. It's a modern Atlantis. It's a very modern curvilinear Guggenheim-esque approach. It is not the Atlantis as you know it in the Bahamas or in Dubai. Very modern.

SSR: Interesting. Talk about a challenge with that many different room types.

JB: Yeah. It was a challenge. Everybody looked at me with grunting in them when every time I walked into that studio. But they would be like, 'Are you kidding me?'

SSR: Daggers.

JB: Daggers is right, Stacy. I mean, it was 900 residences. It's like, 'Are you kidding me?' Okay, maybe 600. Yeah. It was challenging.

SSR: Were there any other projects like that, that stick out as being challenging or tested even your great talents?

JB: Well, I think one of the most challenging projects was ... well, not recent. But I remember the Russian Tea Room. I was hired by the late Warner LeRoy, God bless him, to design the Russian Tea Room for him when he bought it. I'm trying to remember the year. I can't remember. It was a good 10 years ago. Oh, my gosh. That was a very challenging project and that Warner had Warner's vision. Warner was Tavern on the Green. He was extremely flamboyant and extravagant gentleman. It was a disaster. I mean, he was looking for dancing bears and all design things that this wasn't in my wheelhouse. We clashed quite a bit and there's a fine line between giving a client what they want, but staying true to one's ethos and design philosophy. I think I learned a lot from that. I think I got to learn myself a lot. I learned how to be resilient, or at least inpatient. But it was a very challenging project. I got fired, and I got fired. Yes. It was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. It was. My wife and my sons were like, 'Dad, that's the best thing that ever happened to you.'

SSR: Yeah. Not worth it.

JB: Would have gone to your ... I don't know what with that project. They were thrilled. I was devastated, of course. I was walking around New York at three in the morning, like, 'Oh, my God. It's the end of the world.' I mean, I really did.

SSR: That's funny.

JB: But of course, life goes on.

SSR: Yeah. Because I can't see you getting fired from any projects.

JB: Yeah. I was fired. Quite frankly, you're out. You're fired. Yeah. It wasn't fun. I was devastated. I was absolutely devastated. Maybe I was fired once or twice before. But it was not under those circumstances.

SSR: Nicer, nicely, more nicely done?

JB: That's right. This was like, "You're done."

SSR: You're done. I love it.

JB: At the end of the day, it was helpful.

SSR: Yeah.

JB: I learned a lot.

SSR: In retrospect, it's probably a good thing.

JB: Yeah. Yeah. It led to other things. Doors closed, windows closed, and others open.

SSR: Yep.

JB: I think that's very true.

SSR: I like how you said it's a fine line between doing what the client wants, but also bringing your philosophy and your talents to the table. If you had to describe what JB: is—what is your philosophy? What do you instill into your amazing team about design and the way you all approach it?

JB: Well, Stacy, that's a great question to ask. I think it really it's about finding a balance, finding a really wonderful balance of understanding one's client. But really where that middle, where that ground, well, that common ground is. I think that we really strive to bring the best out of—well, every firm, of course, strives to bring the best out of their projects—but I think first and foremost in my mind is understanding really our client's goals and desires and drawing on [our] talents. The firm is made up of so many different backgrounds and diversities. I'm most proud of JBI, the people that work here, everybody that works here is. I think we have maybe, oh gosh, over 15 different nationalities represented here, maybe even more, backgrounds from Europe, from Asia, from Northern Europe, from Eastern Europe. What is really wonderful is how everybody contributes in their own way.

From my travels as a young person with my parents, it's so important to take in the world. Every culture has wonderful things to offer and positive things to take away and learn from. That's what JBI is. JBI is made up of a plethora of talent and cultural diversity that really brings the firm ... We can approach every project with an incredible amount of diversity. Creative thinking and backgrounds that I think clients are most surprised by and thrilled with.

We'll be in a conference room. I encourage everyone in my firm that there's never a bad idea. It's just whether it's appropriate or not. I encourage everyone to speak up and participate. I do that in front of our clients. I do that with our clients. I invite as many young folks as I can to be a part of projects, because there's an energy. They bring in energy. I think our clients really feel that from the firm. There's a tremendous amount of passion here. I promote that a lot. I obviously, I am a very passionate person. I think that's one of the key things about being a designer. You got to have your heart in it. It's all about passion. Yes. There is a tremendous amount of talent and judgment and ability. But if the passion has to be there and that goes to the client, it goes to the project. If you share that with the client, boy, do they get it, you excite them, surprise them that way.



Dune by Jean-Georges Vongerichten at the One & Only Ocean Club in the Bahamas

SSR: Yeah.

JB: That's exciting to me.

SSR: What do you look for when you're hiring at your firm? What would be the piece of advice you would give to a young designer either entering hospitality or evolving their career?

JB: Well, the most important thing, really, or the things that I look for in hiring a designer is passion. There has to be a real passion, and a real interest in desire, a hunger, a yearning for participating in this wonderful world of design we're in, and the world of creativity. Of course, I look for being a hard worker or having a good work ethic and having a good eye and certainly being a good listener. Probably being a team player is a very important thing to me and I think, to anyone, to any owner of any company. We are a team. This is a studio. Not only like moviemaking, I mean, but it's even beyond that. It's an orchestra, and everybody plays a part. I think that everybody plays an important part. Each person that I speak to or designer, I really look for, if they're really devoted to and not only hard work, et cetera, but their heart has to be in it.

SSR: I mean, 35 years, congratulations. How have you evolved the firm? I mean, how you did business in 1985 is very different than how you're doing it in 2021. How have you evolved and pivoted, I hate using that word because it's a word of 2020, and just constantly kept up in any business advice for those also launching their own firm or figuring out how to keep the firm afloat?

JB: We evolve by embracing not only new thinking, but thoughtful thinking, I think that what's really important is to keep one's eyes open and ears open to what is happening around us and the industries that we work in. How our clients are actually evolving? We have to be very in step with that. I don't want to say ahead of it necessarily, although that is very much a part of our responsibility is to bring innovation and creativity and try and think ahead for our clients.

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I think that staying up or looking at the joy of not only hospitality, but of creativity is very important. I think that young folks really, I think, what I love about them is that their eyes are wide open, and their ears are wide open. We evolve through diversity of the people that are involved at JBI. We encourage everyone to speak up. We encourage them to share greatly their own experiences and what they've learned. All of that contributes to staying and evolving the firm and keeping the firm in a very relevant place.

SSR: Yeah, for sure. You've worked with some greats. I mean, Jeffrey Chodorow, Daniel Boulud, Sol Kerzner. I mean, the list goes on and on. You do multiple collaborations with them so they keep coming back. What do you think is the key to a successful relationship between designer, architect, and client?

JB: I think the key to that relationship is collaboration. It's collaboration. I mean, clients are looking to us for innovation and design creativity, for thinking of something that they haven't thought of, or that we can augment and contribute to their goals. I think it's very important to show to a client how engaged you are, and the firm is, for that matter in the project or the studio or whoever's involved. I take a tremendous amount of pride and keen interest in getting to know my clients and getting to know those that you mentioned. There are many others. Yes, I'm proud, but I'm happy. It pleases me greatly when I can develop a collaboration and a personal relationship. We get somewhere that neither one of us maybe thought we could get to, but together, that's really what matters to me. Together with a client, you get somewhere that neither one of you thought you could get to.

SSR: Right. One plus one equals three. Yeah.

JB: Yeah. It's really amazing, Stacy. When you exhibit that kind of interest and bring that energy, yes, I'll use that word, because I think it's important. It is a word. We all need each other and need each other's energy. I mean, I love it. I love your energy. Really, it's inspiring to me, Stacy. You take me to places that I love and haven't been to. It's quite a unique gift. We all have, not only being in this industry, but the relationships we all forge.

SSR: Yeah. It's special. It's like no other. Speaking of that, I can't finish this pod without talking about the elephant in the room, which is COVID right now. It's still is impacting business and everything around us. What do you think will be the ultimate impact of COVID moving forward on design and hospitality? How do you think it will evolve it? Or what many people think is, there are things that it will impact and others it won't. We'll go back to too many things that we can't do right now, which is traveling and hotels and restaurants back to the way they were.

JB: Yeah, absolutely. COVID has been an experience that unlike any other, obviously. I don't have to pontificate on that. But I think that what it has brought to all of us is an understanding of empathy, honestly. Not only empathy and compassion. We're approaching things so much more thoughtfully, I'd like to think. We're thinking about everything in a much deeper way. We're thinking about people and individuals. We're not thinking about big boxes, or margins, and what's the 1,000-room this, or a 500-room that. It's really about [being] memorable. Things that are memorable. That added add to all of our lives. I'd like to think that rather than thinking about necessarily how to pack more people in this place, or that place, or some restaurant, or conference, or convention center. I'm really focused on, yes, of course, health but memorable places. I think that whether it's an urban hotel or resort, hotel or property, I think they have to be ins. I think they have to be thought of that there's an innkeeper—that there are folks that are really interested in your wellbeing and that you really enjoyed your stay and that you'll come back real soon, or you'll tell your friends to come back.

SSR: I love that.

JB: I think local things that are really important to take away from that and we're approaching everything project in a way like that.

SSR: I love that. It's like going back to what hospitality was all about when it started, right?

JB: Absolutely. It's really about hospitality in its truest sense from the husband, the wife, the family—innkeepers that you would be looked after. You would be looked after in every which way. I mean, when you design a hotel room now the minibar really should be, it should be more than that. There should be really ways in which you have really enjoyed your stay in the way that you would enjoy going to a spa, or a retreat, or something that it was really special.

The innkeeper, or whoever was the owner, really looked after you and that means the designers and the architects, and everybody involved is on that page. That we're all on the page to creating memorable experiences, not just fast and brings down the bottom line or the profit margins or whatever. No. It goes to hospitality at its very beginning. I think at its truest and most genuine. There's a genuineness about it that I think we will all welcome and really remember.

SSR: Right. Cherish a little bit more. They'll mean more.

JB: It'll mean more. I mean, when we can travel again, God help us in whatever. I mean, the places I go, I think I will be more attentive, or I will appreciate more, I'd like to. I would like to be able to appreciate the trip that I just took. Whether it's even a business trip, I want it to be something that's not just 24, 48 hours here or there. Especially with my loved ones, when I travel with my loved ones, right?

SSR: Right.

JB: I think that's what's on the table for us as architects and designers.

SSR: I could talk to you forever. But in sake of time, I will ask our final question. We always end on the title of the podcast what I've learned. What has been your greatest lesson learned along the way?

JB: My greatest lesson, probably, and if there's only one, I mean, I've learned maybe a few, Stacy. But my grandfather actually would say to me, 'You can be scared, or you can be fearful. But don't be afraid. Don't be afraid.' I think that's something that is very relevant, obviously, to the whole situation we're in. But it was something that always stayed with me. You can be fearful, but don't be afraid. My mom would always be, 'When in doubt, say yes.' That was her thing. It just she, 'When in doubt, do it.' She just went after it. I think we all are doing that in our own way. My father, of course, was like, 'Just never quit. Never give up.' I think, you can be scared, but don't be afraid is one for me I've learned.

SSR: Love it.

JB: Stay with it.

SSR: Stay with it. I love it.

JB: Stay with it.

SSR: Thank you, Jeffrey. It was just such a joy to catch up with you like this.

<https://www.hospitalitydesign.com/people/podcasts/episode-57-jeffrey-beers/>

JB: Thank you.

SSR: Thank you so much for taking the time.

JB: Stacy, thank you very much for inviting me. It's been a pleasure talking to you as always, as always. I'm thrilled to talk to you. Thank you for ...

SSR: We'll have our annual lunch soon, I hope.

JB: I look forward to that. I love that.