

In 2005, at age thirty-one, Phillip Lim launched his ready to wear collection under the name **3.1 PHILLIP LIM**. Just three years later, the New York-based designer has exploded onto the global stage. His clothes sell in 250 boutiques in 26 countries, and in the past eighteen months, he has opened three free-standing boutiques: a flagship in New York City's SoHo, followed by a store in Tokyo, and most recently, one in Los Angeles, where Lim is originally from. He has received numerous industry accolades, including a Council of Fashion Designers of America award for emerging talent and the prestigious CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund, in which he was a finalist.

Freedom to Play

Phillip Lim

Interviewed by
Jane Keltner and Giancarlo Valle



JK & GV: ARCHITECTURE HAS TRADITIONALLY SUFFERED FROM OPERATING AUTONOMOUSLY, OBSESSED WITH ITS INTERNAL IDIOSYNCRASIES, AND OFTEN UNABLE TO COMMUNICATE TO A WIDER AUDIENCE. FASHION HAS ALSO AT TIMES BEEN ACCUSED OF SERVING A VERY NARROW AUDIENCE AND THUS DISCONNECTING WITH THE LARGER PUBLIC. DO YOU SEE YOUR WORK AS SOMEHOW TRANSCENDING THESE BARRIERS AND CREATING A NEW AWARENESS?

PL: Most definitely! My opinion on design in general is that design and communication go hand in hand. Design is one of the biggest forms of communication. As much as we work in our own world, dreaming, imagining, praying! of how we depict our ideal world, the reality at the end of this dream is that we are merely operators who connect a vision to the public. And the big question is: **DOES IT HAVE A CONNECTION TO THE INTENDED AUDIENCE?** Design, whether it be clothing, buildings, or any kind of product, is such a personal journey. We work so hard to realize what initially is not tangible, trying to make it concrete. So at the end of the journey, the biggest travesty would be that no one gets it and in terms of clothing, that all your hard work, research, and time ends up on the sale rack.

JK & GV: HOW DO YOU APPROACH EACH NEW COLLECTION? WHAT'S THE THOUGHT PROCESS BEHIND IT?

PL: When I design clothes, it starts with an idea. Then I ask myself, how does this idea relate to people? Will people want it? Will they notice it? How will they use it? Will it bring a smile to their face? And how is it relevant to the present? It is a very socialist approach. The idea of accessibility is fascinating on many levels. Most important is how it plays a part in triggering evolution. Basically, it is all full-circle. "We desire, we take a step, we try, we learn, and we improve..."

JK & GV: WITH A RUNWAY SHOW, YOU ARE ABLE TO FRAME THE STORY OF YOUR COLLECTION AND PRESENT YOUR VISION IN ITS PUREST FORM, FROM THE WAY THE MODELS ARE STYLED TO THE ENVIRONMENT SURROUNDING THE CLOTHES. AFTER THAT, YOU LOSE CONTROL IN A SENSE. ONCE THE COLLECTION HITS STORES, THE CUSTOMER IS FREE TO INTERPRET AND ADAPT IT TO THEIR OWN LIFESTYLE OR VISION. HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THAT TRANSITION FROM PERSONAL TO PUBLIC DOMAIN?

PL: This goes back to your previous question, and why I believe design is such a major form of communication. From conception to execution, you have to be rigorous and very clear about your point of view so that it will be as clear and easy to understand as possible for the consumer. After the product leaves your hands, it is beyond your control, so the more education and awareness you can create, the less disappointment results in the end. Early on in my career, it used to kill me to see my vision "distorted" in the hands of the customer, but lately I find it inspiring because it raises questions I never thought of and lends a fresh perspective.

JK & GV: YOU ONCE SAID THAT ARCHITECTURE NEVER LIES. FASHION MOVES AT SUCH HIGH SPEED AND IS SO CAUGHT UP IN "THE NOW" THAT AS SOON AS A DESIGNER PUTS OUT A NEW COLLECTION, HIS LAST ONE IS IN A SENSE BURIED. ARCHITECTURE, IN CONTRAST, REMAINS RELATIVELY PERMANENT. ARCHITECTS CAN'T HIDE THEIR BUILT WORK. EVEN AS THEY EMBARK ON NEW PROJECTS, THE OLDER WORK REMAINS AS A CONSTANT REMINDER. DO YOU THINK THIS SOMEHOW MAKES FASHION LESS TRANSPARENT? AND DOES THIS PRODUCE MORE FREEDOM FOR YOU AS A DESIGNER?

PL: Yes, I think we have more flexibility in terms of the medium in which we work. As much as clothing affects everyday life, and people (no matter how much they deny it... each day we all wake up and make a decision about what we will put on), it is not as permanent. The look/silhouette of clothing can be immediately changed with a simple alteration or shift in accompanying pieces. This allows us more freedom to play. With architecture, the me-

dium is more permanent the accomplishments as well as the mistakes. So in this aspect, architecture is definitely more of a commitment. However, this does not make fashion less transparent. One of the things clothing and architecture have in common is that both are visual-based, meaning that first impressions make a very lasting one. As much as clothing is less committal, it still leaves a lasting impression.

JK & GV: YOU CURRENTLY HAVE BOUTIQUES IN NEW YORK, LOS ANGELES, AND TOKYO, THREE CITIES WITH VERY DISTINCT CULTURES, CLIENTELES AND PERSONALITIES. HOW DO YOU SEE EACH STORE AS SOMEHOW BEING CONTEXTUALIZED WITHIN ITS LOCATION, WHILE STILL MAINTAINING THE GLOBAL IMAGE OF 3.1 PHILLIP LIM?



PL: Each store is viewed as its own project. We approach each location and city with the question: How do we bring our home into someone else's home? How do we move in and assimilate into the culture, while still bringing a sense of freshness with our point of view? With NYC, the store is in SoHo, which is steeped in traditional loft-style buildings. In order to maintain and show appreciation, we left the exterior as is, while reworking what one thinks of classic in an alternative way. The result is a fresh, youthful take on classicism. For Tokyo, it was about bringing a certain classicism to an "anything is possible" scenario. In Los Angeles, it was about "future classicism."

JK & GV: WHAT COMMONALITIES DO ALL OF YOUR STORES SHARE?

PL: Texture, humor, hope, an underlying base of classicism, an alternative point of view toward banality, and the usage of what is considered low-grade-material in a new way. Last but not least, a constant sense of exploration and evolution.

JK & GV: YOU CREATE SIX COLLECTIONS A YEAR, THUS ESSENTIALLY ARE TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF EVERY COUPLE OF MONTHS. YOUR STORES OBVIOUSLY NEED TO SUSTAIN THIS CHANGE AND SERVE A MORE PERMANENT ROLE, WHILE STILL REPRESENTING YOUR EVOLUTION AS A DESIGNER. KEEPING THIS IN MIND, HOW HAVE YOU IMAGINED THE ARCHITECTURE OF YOUR STORES?

PL: This is true, **I AM A MACHINE!** [Laughs.] I always call myself an "evolutionary" designer, as opposed to a "revolutionary" one. As fast and as much as the collections evolve and change, there is always one constant—the "spirit" of the clothes—that is there. My collection is really a parallel to my life; it changes everyday. So I have to be conscious to capture and express that without alienating. When it comes to the stores, I always start with a classic foundation, and with each store it is a new experience. The NYC store was the springboard for Tokyo, and Tokyo was a springboard for



LA, and so on. With each experience we went through the exercises, learned, made mistakes, and some light was shed. It is an overall exercise in exploration and evolution. This is how I see the stores.

JK & GV: EACH SEASON YOU COLLABORATE WITH SOMEONE NEW, FROM JEWELRY TO SHOE DESIGNERS. IN A SIMILAR WAY, FOR EACH OF YOUR STORES YOU HAVE WORKED WITH A DIFFERENT ARCHITECT OR TEAM OF ARCHITECTS. DO YOU SEE THIS FORM OF COLLABORATION AS WAY TO KEEP YOUR WORK MOVING? HOW DO YOU THINK IT PLAYS INTO THE EVOLUTION OF YOUR BRAND AND IMAGE?

PL: It is really case by case. I never intentionally think, "I have to use someone new with each project." It's really about my feelings at that

moment, and how the partners I choose can relate and bring the best to that particular project at that particular time. Everyone has a different specialty, and it would be ignorant of me to think that there is such thing as a singular answer to all. I have a saying I always use, "If you want to go fishing, you have to travel to water." It is really about who/what best embodies what I am looking for and can best help me realize it.

JK & GV: FOR PAST RUNWAY SHOWS YOU HAVE HAD A NUMBER OF ELABORATE STAGE SETS, INCLUDING OVERSIZE PAINTED ARCHWAYS, A SPIRALING YELLOW BRICK ROAD, A HERRINGBONE PATTERN MADE OF MIRRORS, AND MOST RECENTLY CARVED MOORISH WOODEN ARCHWAYS. HOW DO THESE MATERIAL EFFECTS HELP TELL THE STORY OF YOUR COLLECTIONS EACH SEASON?

PL: I regard our shows as a privilege, a way to tell the world what has happened in the past six months of our lives. We get to tell our story in this way twice per year, and it is a chance to express, execute, and release thoughts that have been building up for the past six months. To tell a more impactful story, you need a stage. It really helps to transport the audience into your world for that 15 minutes.



JK & GV: DURING YOUR DESIGN PROCESS, HOW DO YOU CONCEPTUALIZE THE SPACE YOU WANT TO SHOW IN? DOES IT START ALONGSIDE THE DESIGN OF THE COLLECTION, AT THE VERY END, OR DO YOU SOMETIMES HAVE AN IDEA FOR THE SPACE BEFORE YOU BEGIN THE COLLECTION AND LET THE CLOTHES EVOLVE AS A RESPONSE TO THAT.

PL: It changes every season, however it always starts with the collection—the ideas, the shapes, the colors, the textiles, and the mood. During the course of working on the collection, I come across experiences, whether intentionally through research, or by accident, and this helps to focus the ideas and overall picture. From there, a clearer picture appears. At this point, I either can see what I am looking for in my mind, or we go

out to visit sites based on a very general vision. Sometimes, we stumble upon a perfect space to execute the original vision, and other times we modify the vision. It is all really case by case,

JK & GV: WHO IS YOUR SET DESIGNER, AND WHAT IS THE PROCESS OF COLLABORATION?

PL: My set designer is Andrew Ondrejcek. He is simply amazing. We have worked together since my first show. Since we've worked together for a while, our process is very in sync. It usually starts with myself—working on my collection, gathering ideas, and imagining a very vague scene or environment I think the clothes should exist in. About three-quarters of the way into my process, Andrew comes by to see what I have been working on. He comes in as a fresh set of eyes to absorb my chaos. We have a conversation about what I am thinking about. Our conversation goes back and forth. He tells me what he sees, and I tell him what I feel. That exchange is very crucial, as most times it triggers a new way for me to look at my past three months of labor. Our next meeting is usually a week later when he brings rough sketches of his ideas, which we discuss and dissect. After this, he builds a small model so we can review in a three-dimensional way, to try to get a small-scale feeling. From there, we agree or don't agree and adjust. Then it goes to testing with the set shop, and then finally its show time and that first experience that really sets the tone we want to communicate becomes a reality.

JK & GV: THE ACT OF ASSEMBLING AND DEMOLISHING THE SETS IS SUCH A FAST ONE. THEY GO UP AND DOWN WITHIN A 24-HOUR PERIOD. WHAT DO YOU DO WITH YOUR SETS AFTER THE RUNWAY SHOW?

PL: After the show is finished, we donate the set and materials to Free City Arts. It's a program where students can come and recycle, reuse, express themselves.

JK & GV: ARCHITECTURE HAS A WELL-TROTTED HISTORY OF SERVING AS A BACKDROP, PARTICULARLY WITH RESPECT TO STAGE SETS. NUMEROUS ARCHITECTS HAVE TAKEN AN INTEREST IN THE DESIGN OF SETS BECAUSE THEY PROVIDE A DYNAMIC BETWEEN SPACE AND HUMAN MOTION. DO YOU CONSIDER THE INTERIOR OF YOUR STORES AS A BACKDROP OR SOMEHOW WOUND UP IN THE HOLISTIC EXPERIENCE?

PL: **THE MAGIC IS REALLY THE SUM OF THE PARTS.**

With my stores, shows, and clothing, the most important aspect is first impressions. When you walk into my stores, try on a dress, or enter the show space, it is that first initial rush of feeling you get, whether it be calm, chaotic, or both, that really sets the tone for the rest of the experience. When I am working with fellowcollaborators, I always express how important this first feeling is, and howwe can capture this.

JK & GV: ARCHITECTS WELCOME THE ADDED LAYER STAGE SET DESIGN BRINGS, AS IT OFTEN SERVES TO EXPRESS IDEAS WHICH MIGHT BE PRESENT IN THEIR WORK ALREADY BUT ON A SMALLER SCALE. DO YOU FIND THAT WITH YOUR COLLECTIONS, STAGE SETS CAN HELP EXPRESS SOMETHING YOU MIGHT NOT NECESSARILY ACHIEVE THROUGH THE CLOTHING ALONE?

PL: Yes, in my case, without a house, there is just clothes, and without clothes, there is an empty room. The collaborative effort plays such an important part in having the full experience. When I design clothes, I imagine where they will exist. What type of woman/man lives in my clothes? What lifestyle does she have? So this is where setting the stage comes in. Whether through your own controlled environment such as a store, or through runway shows, it really provides the context for the contents.

