

# Joseph Dirand

Best known for his critically acclaimed collaborations with global fashion houses, interior architect du jour, Joseph Dirand, continues to astound with his radically minimalist designs. His approach – total immersion in a project and visual cues to sell the story of a brand – has proved to be a successful formula time after time. Luxury retail space, high-profile restaurants and grand hotels all bear the hallmarks of the Dirand magic. Harrison Gorman meets the king of pared-down elegance, who reflects on his famously monochromatic palette, home life, and his dream of transforming a desert island from scratch.

*You are known for a particular minimalist aesthetic, but what inspires you at this moment in time?*

Culture is something that is growing. And the more you have, the better you will be able to analyze and find answers. My biggest inspiration is keeping my eyes open and being curious. You have to keep an eye on everything going on in the world that we live in today, to analyze what people want in their public or private lives.

*Is there anything in particular that provokes or influences you?*

Understanding the past is important, it allows us to reinvent things, make them evolve, and to be able to be a part of evolution. We are creating for tomorrow. The projects we make today will be ready in a couple of years, with the ambition to stay and a legacy put in place to inspire others.

*Can you elaborate on your current projects?*

We're now finishing the Four Seasons hotel in Miami, my biggest project so far. We invented a lot for it, like the idea of a living room in a bedroom where two people don't just share a sofa. There should be a connection between the two people. If a room inspires you to have more sex, then we are getting somewhere. Every aspect that can create beauty in life contributes to the success of a design.

It has been such an amazing collaboration with the developer Nadim Ashi – we've started other projects together, including another Four Seasons project next to the current one. It will be a very big, mixed hotel and condo building, with a different story and spirit.

*Your architectural practice has truly gone global in the last couple of years. The sky must be the limit?*

In New York, we're also doing a very big restaurant for Joël Robuchon which will be a sort of 'Maison Robuchon,' with a gastronomic restaurant, a tea saloon, a market. It will be in a Norman Foster building on the Upper East Side, developed by Aby Rosen who is an amazing developer.

There are a couple of new restaurants we're working on with Gilles Malafosse, with whom we did the Loulou, Monsieur Bleu and Le Flandrin. Construction of the fourth is about to start and we're already working on number five and six. It's a nice story that we are continuing together. It's good because finally you see you are working again with the best people you have met in your life.

*How do you approach a project from Day One? Do you follow a particular routine?*

My style is not closed into one way of looking at things. I have created something very specific for all of my

projects. I always compare my approach with that of a writer. I have a certain way of writing my stories, so my stories are unique. This is what's exciting about my work. We are always looking for new challenges.

We involve so much passion in our work that I like these projects to be alive. The people who visit hotels and restaurants change every day and you need to be able to share the experience that you believe in with the maximum number of people.

*You must be so much in demand for personal projects?*

Yes, that's something personal which is very important to me. I'm now trying to create a collection of homes that we will design. First, we'll need to find the most beautiful – not necessarily the biggest – property. Then the plan is to rent them out.

Today everything is very expensive. It's very difficult to buy things and everything is evolving towards the idea of sharing, like everyone having a private driver with Uber. Why would you need to spend so much money to have access to your dream house when you can just rent it?

*You must have a pretty effective team to have all these projects on the go at once?*

I'm very proud of my team. We have all these common passions. We all love what we do. We love working together. We all challenge ourselves, beyond what people ask us to do.

I've always tried to avoid creating a hierarchical way of doing things, and I try to keep people here as long as possible. This is only possible if they know they get more pleasure in their personal lives from working in this team than if they were to start their own studio. They feel they are part of it.

*What do you do to push yourself and keep growing?*

My work evolves by spending more time on creativity, rather than focusing on increasing the number of projects we have. This means we can get into the small details. I want to be able to feel, to experience, and to grow culturally so I can do things better every year.

*Are you more inspired by your travels or from your daily life?*

By travelling I have the opportunity to try and experiment with so many different things, cultures, ways of answering questions such as: 'what is a hotel?' and 'what is the key to the success of all these spaces?'

I'm so sensitive to the pleasures of everyday life that I try to include these pleasures in my work. I consider the design to be the easy part. What is important is how you create magic through feelings, emotion,





UTOPIST HABITATION CELL FOR ARTCURIAL, PARIS

and the relation to people. How do you design furniture beyond just style? How do you create emotion between two people sharing a bedroom?

*I heard last summer's travel plans guided your recent work?*

My work is increasingly defined by my own personal trips. I chase interesting places to expose myself to a maximum of new experiences. The more experience I get, the more I will be able to translate them into creating new experiences for others, and for myself. For pleasure, I aim to discover three or four new countries in remote places during the summer with my wife and daughter.

Two summer's ago we went to Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Venezuela – very isolated places. I get inspired by nature. Every time I travel it allows me to get a certain distance away from my work. Last summer we went to Tanzania and Namibia, and I'm always surprised by how many things you can still discover today.

*And closer to home, how does Paris influence you?*

I was born and grew up in Paris, and have my life here. Paris is a big and small city. People live a certain way here that is very different than other places. I have to be honest – there are certain things here that I love and others that I don't like.

I try to concentrate on the things I like – our culture and the way we are educated. Food, music, architecture and art have always been important. The transmission of knowledge here is very special.

We also don't have a business-oriented culture, but rather one based on ideology. I work in the States a lot and I love how dynamic, courageous and visionary the people there are. It's a culture that inspires me a lot, but I do things differently. I come with my French background and work with people who have a different perspective. Different people working together can build something that is very strong.

*So, Paris is definitely home for now?*

Life is full of surprises, but I don't see myself living anywhere else but Paris. But I love travelling to New York, Miami, London – extremely dynamic cities from where we have a lot to learn. What I wanted to do with the Loulou and Monsieur Bleu restaurants was to create this dynamism. When you look at a restaurant in New York, it is often inspired by a certain idea of how a restaurant should be. And that idea of a brasserie comes from France.

In the same way Italy is strong in design, we can ask ourselves why the French have always been so strong in the field of interior design, specifically Starck, Liaigre, Graf, Grange and Pinto. There are so many people who have grown in this culture who have created some kind of revolution. Philippe Starck revolutionised the hotel industry with Ian Schrager, and Christian Liaigre inspired many copycats, but also people who wanted to do something even better.



CHLOÉ, PARIS

BELLECHASSE, PARIS





**“I’m a minimal person, ever since I was young. From art to music, my sensibility is responsive to this idea of minimalism. Minimalism is resistant.”**

*Where is your favourite place in the world?*

My apartment! It’s the only place I can escape to, and it’s definitely where I’m the most creative, alone in my apartment, usually at night.

It’s also great going to the places I’ve designed: I design what I desire. I do things also for me, and so those are places where I’m happy to go. I see people enjoying them. I see people being nice to me because they are happy with what I’ve done. People are generous to me, and so I’m trying to be generous to them!

I live in the 7th arrondissement of Paris and there are a lot of galleries. I sometimes get out of my apartment to just walk past all the galleries. That’s something I love to do.

*Just going back to your signature look – it’s worked incredibly well with your past collaborations, including Balmain, Balenciaga and Chloé. At what point did you embrace this aesthetic?*

I’m a minimal person, ever since I was young. From art to music, my sensibility is responsive to this idea of minimalism. Minimalism is resistant.

I have always started with a white, blank page. I designed my first project based on the experience I had at that time, which was purely transferring my personal aspirations and sensibilities. So, I’ve been able to experiment a lot with pure architectural mechanisms: contrast, scale, and volume.

I was using a lot of black and white for a period of time. True, black and white was, at a certain point, a bit out of fashion, but in a way I was able to create a lot of strong visual emotions with those plays on contrast. I’ve also brought elements of inspiration from the past, like moldings and more sculptural elements.

*You’re wearing black – people associate the monochromatic look with your work. That’s a strong look.*

There are no rules, I’m in black now probably because it’s grey outside, but I’ve evolved a lot. I’m definitely not a black and white person, and I’m definitely not purely minimal. It’s funny to see this perception from the other side. People like to define me as a sexy minimalist. I do have a certain way of doing things, and that is delivering great projects.

*And your evolution towards colour?*

The Palais de Tokyo is from this kind of radical, dark but beautiful period in architecture. I did a lot of research and was very inspired by Adolf Loos, and the conclusion was to use green – not because I feel that it’s a nice colour, but because I couldn’t use anything else. If I couldn’t use this green, it wouldn’t work. From this point on, I felt freer to experiment with colors and to justify them.

In Miami, the colors I’m using are those in front of my eyes: the palm trees, the beach, the colour of the water, the sky. I have become more decorative in my work because they are writing a story that talks about something in a specific location.

With Loulou, it was adding layers: a frame of moldings, plus some black panels, plus rattan and mirrors

that allow me to go deeper into the subject. Then there are the Saarinen chairs, the super-heavy red marble on the floor, and the red curtains – it’s very theatrical and very decorative. It’s in the museum of Les Arts Décoratifs, so it needs to relate to that. The question was how to talk about the space without talking about just one designer – thankfully, it showcases all the movements and different styles.

*How do you choose which materials to use?*

I started my career using materials that were very plain, secure and risk-free, so I could really focus on the form. I’ve since discovered that marble is much more expressive.

When I presented this marble floor in Loulou, even Gilles Malfosse looked at me and said: “are you crazy, it’s ugly!” I said: “yes, it’s beautifully ugly.” You take something that is dangerous and not necessarily aesthetic, because maybe it’s a little too much, but in relation with the rest it becomes beautiful. It’s the proportion of ingredients you put in your recipe that creates a beautiful taste.

*You’re also using form and shape more in your recent work.*

Right now I’m doing two big projects, one of which is a tower in New York City around Central Park, where everything is round, without any square angles. Light flows progressively without shadows, until light becomes its own shadow.

I need to reinvent myself and find another way to experiment new things. We are now also trying to work with cut angles. So, instead of square space, we’re bringing multi-faceted spaces. I hope I will never find myself feeling that I have nothing more to experiment with, because I would feel very frustrated!

*You have been developing your own line of furniture. What pushed you to do this?*

It comes from a strong need and desire. For my projects, everything we design is more and more custom-made. At the Four Seasons, we’re designing every light, every chair, every sofa. There are very few things that I buy. I prefer to design my own kitchen, down to the taps. Maybe tomorrow I’ll start to design my fridge!

I designed a few pieces for this exhibition at the Pierre Marie Giraud gallery in Brussels. I work with these craftsmen who have this real belief that anything is possible, and we go out and create things that seem very difficult in the eyes of an architect. But we are dreamers, and they have so much knowledge that allows us to find solutions together. We never want to compromise.

I don’t want to see my pieces everywhere – I just want these pieces to exist. If people fall in love with a piece, they want to have it, and it’s a strong decision. I don’t want to have stores selling my pieces, I want to develop this the way I’ve developed my other work, and this is very important to me. It’s all about the passion.

*How important is technology in your work?*

When technology is overused, it kills the beauty of thinking and doing things yourself.

The problem with technology is that nothing lasts. It helps our lives, it’s a tool, but in a way we have become slaves to technology. I won’t criticize it because it has helped a lot of things, but in my work I’m not that interested in it.

I think the best way to turn a light on is with a switch, rather than with an iPad or remote control. If technology makes your life easier in a very simple way, of course it’s great. If it’s about having a robot in your fridge ordering food without you asking what you want to eat, then I’m not interested. The future will arrive at the right time.

*What would be your dream project?*

Nadim Ashi bought an incredible island in the Bahamas called Norman’s Cay. It’s in Exuma which is a protected area and absolutely beautiful. This island has a very specific story, famous for being the HQ for all the drug cartels. Being the only island in the area with a landing strip, all of Pablo Escobar’s cocaine from South America passed through here. Eventually, the government recaptured and sold it.

It would be an amazing opportunity to develop such a tiny territory from zero where there is no water and electricity. The dream is not only to design the architecture, but also to create a community and share the natural beauty with people.

*The world has seen a lot of your work, but people don’t really know much about you. Why is that?*

In a way I’m a very shy and private person. I don’t have a Facebook or Instagram profile. Having said that, I want to expose myself to pleasure as much as I can: traveling, food and experiencing extremes in emotions. Above all, being in love – I have a beautiful daughter.

My work is how I express myself. I feel very simple in a way. There is a big gap between how people see you and the personal perception of yourself. I feel very small, but I am conscious that what we do is important. I expect my work to inspire people as much as the work of other people inspires me.

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Joseph Dirand is photographed by Christophe Roué at his home in Paris.

WEBSITE  
josephdirand.com