

JOSEPH DIRAND

HIGH TIDE



Photography by Jesper D. Lund
Words by Siobhan O’Leary

I arrived at Joseph Dirand’s sixth floor offices in the Saint-Georges quarter of Paris on one of the first truly warm, clear days of early spring. Dark doors opened onto a bright, double exposure space where rows of young architects and designers clicked away at their desks, framed by sweeping views of the rooftops of the eighteenth arrondissement. Dirand’s office sits at the far end of the room.

He was finishing a cigarette as I set my things down on a large table around which the office appears to gravitate. A stack of floor plans and renderings had been pushed aside to make space for our conversation, their edges curling inward the way architectural drawings often do after long stretches in tubes.

“I’ll be just a few minutes,” Dirand said. I took in the view and tried to make out the titles of some of the dozens of books lining the left wall, but I wasn’t wearing my glasses.

Dirand’s desk is a mammoth piece of white stone. Its shape is so seamless that it appears to have formed into a desk long before it was ever extracted from a quarry. This is no surprise, really, as the most effortless-looking objects and activities often hide years of extreme toil and unending complexity. This is exactly the case with all of Dirand’s oeuvre, replete with a deceptively pared-back design that carries all the codes of 1960s Arte Povera, Japanese restraint, and French Touch refinement. His choices, right down to the artworks selected for urban interiors, or the ingenious bathtub in an immense Courchevel chalet he designed (where the water stops just as it fills the small dips at the base of the neck) are thoughtful, and come from deep narrative projections or “storyboarding” that Dirand undertakes right from the outset.

Dirand’s considered approach is well established, nearly thirty years into a whirlwind career that has seen him progress with acuity from the early days of family and friends commissions to designing a 120m super yacht, a cruise ship-inspired Miami apartment building, or a resort that is more like a small village on an Island in the Bahamas.





While the genesis of the genius stories are sometimes just that stories of Dirand is the real deal. His father was an interior design and architecture photographer who Dirand describes as *“a frustrated architect, in a way,”* and his mother was a fashion designer. *“Every night, at dinner, my father would review his negatives and share these images with the family,”* Dirand tells me, *“these thousands and thousands of images became a part of my background and education along with the artists from many different fields who came to our home when I was young.”*

While Dirand was in architecture school, he assisted his father during his commissions. *“I became able to understand architecture through a frame,”* Dirand says, *“I was right next to my father when he was placing his camera at a certain angle to photograph in a particular way; where the light, the depth, and all of the possible frames were an integral part of his lecture on architecture.”*

A photographic vision, anchored in making sense of the line, of perspective, and of visual narrative, underscores Dirand’s practice to this day. With a keen mind’s eye, Dirand says he *“projects himself into the progression of a space in frames.”* *I question every moment. How do we interconnect in an environment? When my wife is in the bathroom, I can see her in the mirror from the bedroom and we can talk. When I’m in the bathroom, I can see the view of the bedroom from the shower. There is a lot of envisioning.”*

Dirand cut his teeth designing stores for fashion brands, where he was tasked with spearheading projects with radically different identities. *“I started with a store for friends of my parents, and then I did Balmain, Chloé, Pucci, Alexander Wang, Balenciaga, Givenchy.”* These brands were so different from each other. *I had to force myself each time to enter into a new skin or a new narrative.”* All the while, developing a layered approach. *“When I started my career, my spaces were completely minimal and all white, and then I began to build contrast, to bring historical elements, and combine something very radical with a classic environment to create an emotional space.”*

Behind Dirand’s balanced layering is a Japanese-inspired philosophy that emphasizes the beauty of simple complexity. *“Japanese design is even though it is extremely restrained it has a level of sophistication behind the simplicity that is insane. It is in the composition, even in the idea of Kintsugi, of fixing a*

broken plate,” Dirand tells me. He cites the countryside home he is building for his family just outside of Paris as an incubator for pushing even further a Kintsugi sensibility. *“There is a closed quarry nearby,”* Dirand says, *“I found these two blocks of extraordinary stone and broke them on the floor with a little hammer. We started placing the pieces and reassembling them into an immense puzzle. It appears absolutely random, but it is anything but. It is following an accident with a purpose that takes you to somewhere insanely beautiful, like a kind of poetry.”*

Dirand’s spaces have often been described as possessing a *“calm authority,”* perhaps due to the monolithic stone with which he works and the ineffable nature of minimalism. Yet Dirand himself points to fragility as central to how he thinks about the way spaces can suggest a particular way of living. *“Around fifteen years ago, I stayed for a couple of days in a traditional Japanese home. I realized how much the fragility of the space shapes your behavior. You are more careful, your attitude is different,”* he says. *“However, I don’t want architecture to make you a slave to it.”*

For Dirand, architecture should above all offer generosity. *“I don’t like architecture that is considered radical because it has a strong frame but nowhere where you can sit, feel, and be in harmony. The base of everything in architecture is that it needs to be generous, it needs to be comfortable. It is not something just to be seen, but something to feel.”*

This attention to how architecture is actually lived extends to the smallest details. *“If you don’t anticipate how a house lives, a lot of things will become disturbing,”* Dirand tells me. *“If you make a dining table out of glass, for example, every time you put your knife or fork down there will be a disturbing noise. I always think about how I can create an environment that limits everyday suffering.”* Dirand adds, *“Well, I considered architecture should make your life easier.”*

Dirand’s emphasis on feeling through architecture was developed over a background in hospitality design. After a myriad of commercial spaces, the architect was keen to focus on creating moments of connection and memory. *“With hospitality,”* Dirand reflects, *“the interconnection with the user was completely different. I was creating a frame for people to have an experience, which was more gratifying to me than creating one just for function. I had to create*



a different narrative, and ask: What is the story you want to tell? From restaurants like Grand Café, Monsieur Bleu, Loulou, and Girafe, Dirand focused on the narrative he could tell through architecture.

I started to select projects because I was interested in narrative, Dirand says. That is still what excites me today — finding projects that offer a completely new story. Recalling his super yacht project, Dirand says, I got this incredible opportunity to design a boat. It was extraordinary for many reasons. Firstly, because I have zero knowledge of boats. And then, because it was at once a leisure project, a private residence, and also a hospitality project. It could be in Antarctica one day and by a private island in the South Pacific the next. So how can you create an architecture that responds to all of this? For me, it's all about experience and memories. That was really what was at play here.

He describes this insatiable search for new experiences and inventive stories as akin to a hunt driven by desire. It's a very important factor for me in architecture, the idea of hunting, says Dirand, Hunting for the reference, the story — It's almost like going on an adventure. And searching for common desire or curiosity in dialogue with the people that you're meeting. My projects today are quite long — they can take five to ten years, so it's important that the journey is something that you will enjoy every moment, even if it is a difficult practice.

For Dirand, the architectural hunt is intrinsically linked to searching for the new and trying not to fall into repetition. My career has been about saying no to projects, he says, I'm always trying to push myself not to repeat. I don't want someone to look at a project and say that it is us who designed it.

Dirand is constantly pushing his career goalposts further into the horizon. Projects that are underway offer breathtaking glimpses of grandeur in Capri, where his team has drawn inspiration from the Greco-Roman architecture of Pompeii to storyboard a leisure residence with sumptuous interiors. It may seem far removed from the black and white minimalism of his early work, yet the signature remains. It has simply evolved: from early-career, carefully composed frames to projects like feature-length films. Dirand is ever-hunting for the challenge and excitement of telling a new story.

