

PROFILE

Michael Zenreich,
Michael Zenreich Architects PC

The code breaker



way, and how it was beautifully designed," Zenreich said. "One day, someone pointed out that the bridges were all different."

Though he initially put the project on hold to focus on his architecture career, he has now documented more than 20 overpasses. Zenreich recently digitized the black and white prints and posted them at: www.themerrittparkway.com. And the images are also displayed at FX Fowle's Chelsea office.

And Zenreich also just completed a series of oil pastel paintings, which are on display at Cooper Classics Collection in the West Village.

His decision to pick up a paintbrush for the first time in several years was inspired by one of his clients — an artist who turned out to be a teacher at Pratt and a friend of one of his art school classmates. The walls of the midtown loft Zenreich designed for her, which was featured in *The New York Times* earlier this year, are adorned with paintings.

While passionate about art and design, the crux of his business today exercises his left-brain a bit more often.

"Just this morning, a guy wanted to buy a commercial loft and convert it into a residence," said Zenreich, who grew up in the Far Rockaway neighborhood of Queens and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting from the Pratt Institute. While the project turned out to meet city guidelines, Zenreich spotted one potential hurdle: "The city says yes to conversions, but the condo board can say no."

In NoHo, where the expansion of floor area is prohibited, Zenreich managed to design a rooftop cabana that received city approval. Since city laws on enlarging NoHo buildings are rather restrictive, he routinely fields calls from clients on the subject — and some of his client aren't your everyday landlord.

"I get to work on a lot of celebrities projects," said Zenreich, who founded his firm in 1990 and counts six of his former Yale School of Architecture professors

among his renowned client base. "And it's because I provide the framework from initiation to completion."

While most architects outsource legal analysis to full-time expeditors, Zenreich is equipped to handle all stages of the building process. After assessing the feasibility of construction plans, he is often hired to complete them.

Joining Eli Attia Architects in 1980, his first assignment involved analyzing zoning regulations for a midtown construction site. Zenreich went on to manage large-scale commercial projects like the Republican Bank Tower and New York Hospital, before the firm ultimately named him a partner in 1988.

But two years later, an economic recession crippled New York's real estate market; worked dried up for Eli Attia and Zenreich, which led him to consider venturing on his own under an expanded business model.

"I had no real work around for three or four years, so I consciously decided to become a service-oriented firm," said Zenreich, who has also taught at the Fashion Institute of Technology and New York University. "I realized there were lots of things people needed to use an architect for — even in a recession."

It's a lesson that has not only kept Zenreich afloat during the current economic slump, but has him busier than ever. And the ever-changing codes keep him on his toes, regulation-wise and, sometimes, artistically as well. For example, architects are now required to illustrate compliance with energy efficiency standards in their blueprints.

Now that the city has clamped down on shoddy construction (following a series of crane accidents that occurred during New York's real estate boom), he said projects often take twice as long to earn approval.

While the nature of his work began being more rooted in design, tapping into his artistic potential, the pendulum has swung toward his pragmatic self.

"I look at my career and it's always been on the artistic side, but the business has morphed into coding and zoning," said Zenreich, who divides his time between an art-filled Park Avenue apartment and a home in Westport, Conn. "As for design, I'll leave that to the younger kids."

By LIANA GREY

Both a painter and pragmatist, architect Michael Zenreich spends the bulk of his days interpreting the city's cumbersome construction codes. When a client is looking to get a project approved — a loft conversion, say, or a new restaurant — Zenreich is the stroke of genius behind the creative solutions to any problems that arise during the building process.

Zenreich has more than 4,000 projects under his belt, including high-profile endeavors like Nobu, a four-star Tribeca restaurant, and 497 Greenwich Street, an undulating glass and steel condominium designed by Winka Dubbeldam of Archi-Tectonics. Much like his artwork, his design projects invoke both the practical and the progressive.

Earlier in his career — with permission from the Landmarks Preservation Commission — he meticulously expanded and removed a fire escape from a 150-year-old building on West 23rd Street, converting the commercial property into mixed-use space with a ground-floor restaurant and residences above. "I did everything from design to construction to expediting," Zenreich said. "I'm a balance between left-sided and right-sided."

Case in point: More than 30 years ago, he submitted a portfolio of abstract paintings based on mathematical formulas to the Yale School of Architecture. The pieces, some of which hang in his Chelsea office, are what he describes as "logical paintings."

During his last year at Yale, Zenreich also received a grant from the National Endowment of Humanities to photograph the historic bridges that span eastern Connecticut's Merritt Parkway — a project that harked back to his brief stint as a professional photographer, snapping wedding portraits and working on catalogs.

"My professors all talked about the Merritt Park-