

A man with short dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt and dark jeans, is sitting on a modern, dark-colored sofa. He is smiling at the camera. Behind him is a fireplace with a bright fire burning. The room has a modern, minimalist aesthetic with dark walls and a large window or glass partition in the background. The text "JIUN HO" is overlaid in large, light-colored letters, with "DESIGNING FOR A BETTER WORLD" in smaller letters below it.

JIUN HO

DESIGNING FOR A BETTER WORLD

Having tired of making endless sandcastles and Lego buildings, designer Jiun Ho struck a deal with his mother that if he got all As in school, she would take him somewhere, anywhere. Ho delivered, and was treated to his first trip abroad from his native Kuala Lumpur to Japan and Korea — at age 9. “I became fascinated by the culture, the history, the gardens, the palaces,” he says. “From then on, I realized that I had an unyielding passion for travel, and set out to develop a life and a career that allowed me to see the world and draw inspiration from it.”

Design came calling, as did travel, to the extent that Ho eventually set out “to go to more than a hundred countries in the world by the time I hit forty — I have been to seventy-eight so far. So now when I travel for work, I take side trips to countries I have never been to, and each year I try to see ten new countries and cities.”

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Hartford Street residence,
San Francisco, living room.

After spending a year studying design at the University of Iowa ("I thought every city in America looked like New York, until I spent time in Iowa — surrounded by cornfields"), Ho transferred to the International Academy of Merchandising and Design in Chicago, where the views proved more exciting. He was hired right out of school by a design firm in Chicago to work on the Petronas Twin Towers in his hometown of Kuala Lumpur. "It was great; I spoke the language and liked the job, but nine months into it, I realized it was not my calling to sit in a cubicle and try to fit more cubicles into a building," says Ho, who finished the project and went to San Francisco, tried his hand at AutoCAD drawing for a few years and finally eschewed the cubicle forever in favor of launching his own firm.

His first client, "a wealthy lady in Taipei," needed furniture for her Jiun Ho apartment. "She wanted something no one else had," says the designer. "I said why not, did some watercolor sketches of twenty-five or thirty pieces, and she said, 'I love them, can you make them all?' She was a dream first client." Before he knew it, his furniture had taken off, and his collection grew into more than 100 pieces, all inspired by his travels. A 2006 trip to Botswana and South Africa resulted in the Africa collection and its Mopane chair, in sustainably harvested oak with a dark espresso finish, clearly African-inspired but with a new attitude and proportions. "It has a colonial influence to it, but in a very simple, modern way," says Ho. "I wanted this collection to be obviously influenced by Africa, and sophisticated enough to be used in an urban setting, or even a log cabin."



Hartford Street residence,
San Francisco, office.

Ho's French collection, which came about after days of hiking through the Loire Valley, has more refined lines and includes the Chambord Tete-a-Tete, which recalls a classic corner chair but is stuffed and positioned for intimate conversation. Ho calls his French collection a modern version of the Louis collection, which includes end tables inspired by each of the famous kings: a square-topped cocktail version for the earlier king, and a more ornate side table topped with a circle of Calcutta Gold marble for the later. Treks to Chile and Argentina have also resulted in smooth, contemporary collections. "No matter what I'm designing, I consider myself a modernist," says Ho. "I always ask myself, 'how can I design a collection in the same language and with the same principles of the traditional, yet make it more transitional?'"



Steiner Street residence,
San Francisco, dining room.



California Street residence, San Francisco.



Designer Jiun Ho at
Hotel Renew, Honolulu.

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Karibu Lounge Chair,
The Africa Collection.



For the answers to such design challenges, Ho often takes to the skies. While his bustling, art- and antiques-filled tri-level office south of Market in San Francisco does inspire, it includes public space “like a lab, where everybody interacts” on the second floor and his private residence on the third floor; therefore, Ho can only truly escape, concentrate and contemplate in the air. “I spend most of my time on the plane, and I do most of my designing on the plane,” Ho says. “When I’m in the office, I get interrupted by the phone, emails, questions and problems, and I end up doing everything but designing. When I’m on the plane, there are no interruptions. It is an important part of my office.”

Ho says that he requires the important equilibrium that both his furniture and his interior design commissions, which include hotels and residences, provide. “I like the balance: When you design a space, you don’t just think about the architecture part, you think about how the clients will live in the space and how it should be furnished. I design custom furniture for most of my clients, so the design is completely intertwined.” He also makes a point of living with every piece he designs before he puts it into the market or into someone’s living room. “I live with it, make some changes and tweak it some more,” says Ho. “I do it so much, my friends joke that my furniture is different every time they come over.”



Dining room, *Metropolitan Home's Modern by Design Showhouse*. San Francisco, 2009.

Hartford Street residence,
San Francisco, living room.

In the near future, Ho says he will continue to rely on his love of travel, nature, food and luxury hotels, in that order, to carry him through his demanding life. He is currently at work on a new furniture collection and is designing a new spa. "I'm also in the process of trying to find some amazing artists from all over the world to collaborate with on a small collection of limited-edition art-as-furniture pieces called Uniquely Jiun," he says. And with that, he is off to his next destination: Asia, with a special side trip to Sri Lanka. With a lift in his voice, he says, "I haven't been there yet."



Hartford Street residence, San Francisco, bedroom.





Hotel Renew lobby, Honolulu.



Hartford Street residence, San Francisco, kitchen.

Q & A

WITH JIUN HO



HOW GREEN ARE YOU?

I try to be as green as I can be with both furniture and interiors. I recently finished Hotel Renew in Honolulu, which we call "light green" for its green touches, such as a recycle bin in every room and dimmer bulbs on every single fixture. It makes the environment more attractive and saves energy.

WHAT IS YOUR DESIGN PET PEEVE? WHAT DO YOU WISH WOULD JUST GO AWAY?

One of my major design pet peeves is people building houses way too big, or those that do not fit the location or the environment. I had to work on a couple projects in Sin City, Las Vegas, and nothing is more disgusting than the Tuscan villas there. Tuscan villas belong in Tuscany. I don't care how much money you spend, it's never going to look like Tuscany. Nothing in that city is green, even if it's LEED certified; just the amount of water that you need for those swimming pools, giant fountains and golf courses, is not green. Same thing in Dubai, which I have visited many times and actually find very interesting. Dubai is Las Vegas on steroids.

HOW DO YOU, AND SHOULD YOU, PLEASE A DIFFICULT CLIENT?

That's my everyday job. We are in the service industry; it's my job to provide the best service I can. There are some difficult clients, but if you are patient and try to educate them, it's really helpful. The reason they come to you is that they need your expertise. Sometimes I put my foot down and say you are being too difficult, but I like all my clients, and most of them are dream clients.

WHAT DO YOU PREDICT WE WILL SEE IN THE NEXT DECADE OF DESIGN?

Design is going to become more fluid, more organic, in the way that we have already started to see. Interestingly enough, technology has allowed us to make buildings and monuments that appear, more than ever before, to be inspired by nature.

WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS FOR THE FUTURE OF YOUR DESIGNS?

I would like to continue to explore designing more products, like textiles and fixtures, which I am very curious about. I would also like to design more hospitality, restaurants, hotels and spas — I really enjoy those. And I am always trying to find ways to use my designs to somehow benefit some of the people I have met over the years in the more developing countries; I am trying to figure out a way to use design to change their lives.



Mopane Dining Chair, Africa Collection.