

Interview: Vishaan Chakrabarti

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WAN Exclusive: 425 Park Avenue



EDITORIAL

Sharon McHugh speaks to competition organiser Vishaan Chakrabarti about the 425 Park Avenue scheme in New York

This week WAN got a behind-the-scenes look at the design competition for 425 Park Avenue, New York's newest skyscraper and the first building of consequence to be built on Park Avenue in over half a century.

If ever there was an ultimate commission, it is perhaps the job of designing a new office tower at 425 Park Avenue. Not only is Park Avenue quite possibly the most important commercial boulevard in New York City and quite possibly the United States, as Matt Chaban put it writing about the project in the New York Observer, the commission is also an opportunity of a lifetime, the chance to put one's stamp on a building that is steps away from the legendary Seagrams Building and Lever House. For architects, it is a rare and precious challenge. And for David Levinson, CEO of L&L Holding, which owns the building, it is a chance to bring a bespoke skyscraper of enormous character and quality to the famous Avenue.

For his part, Levinson had the good sense to invite the world's best architects to table, to gather not one idea for the building but many. Earlier this year he staged a design competition for the project inviting 11 firms from across the globe to participate. Four were shortlisted, and one, British practice Foster + Partners, was named the winner. We spoke with Vishaan Chakrabarti, who ran the competition for L&L Holding on the occasion of the Municipal Arts Society's annual summit of city shapers, held last week, where Foster made his first public presentation of the project about the competition, the challenge of building on Park Avenue, and why Foster (who bested shortlisted practices OMA, Zaha Hadid and Richard Rogers) got the nod.

Chakrabarti, as readers know, is a much respected voice in New York's design community; a new partner at SHoP, which just celebrated the opening of Barclay's Center; the Director of Columbia University's Real Estate Development Program; a former executive at Related Companies; a former Planning Commissioner for the City; and most recently a juror for WAN's Civic Buildings Awards Sector. For 425 Park Avenue, Chakrabarti was one of four people elicited by L&L Holding for advice on selecting an architect for the project. The others were Mary Ann Tighe, CEO of CBRE's New York Tri-State Region; Vin Cipolla, President of the Municipal Arts Society; and Jennifer Raab, President of Hunter College who previously was Chair of the city's Landmark Preservation Commission.

Sharon:

Hello Vishaan. Thank you for doing this. I saw your presentation today and Norman's too. Both were very good. I'd like to talk to you today about the design competition for 425 Park Avenue that you ran for L&L Holding, which led to Foster's selection. How did you come to be involved with that?

Vishaan:

I met David Levinson (the owner of L&L Holding) a few years ago when I was working at Related. He and I liked each other a great deal and I have a lot of respect for him. He's an amazing teacher of architecture. Right before I joined SHoP as a Partner, David asked me if I would help him run this competition. I was thrilled and honored to be part of the process. It's rare that you see competitions done with this level of respect and diligence.

Something that all the architects really appreciated was the level of open dialogue involved. It wasn't simply here's the competition brief....see you in six weeks. There was a lot of dialogue with all the participants. I don't know if you saw the book that was created but this was very much something I was very much fan of. In addition to a sending the architects a letter inviting them to participate, we sent the 11 initial firms that we collected together, a copy of a book that we created on 425 Park Avenue. It was very elegantly put together. I think it engendered the kind of response that we wanted. All of the architects we invited are very famous and very busy. The book demonstrated to them that this was very serious commission and not just any old competition.

Sharon:

I didn't see the book. Can you provide a flavor of it?

Vishaan:

It was a hard cover book with a hard cover sleeve and it was done with classic modern thought. Lots of white space. Generous use of Ezra Stoller photographs. It really talked about values, culture, technology, and the legacy of buildings like Seagrams and the Lever House. The book immediately sent a message about sensitivity to great architecture. It really demonstrated that this commission wasn't about creating any old office building but something that really was indicative of a very different future.

Sharon:

How were the initial 11 architects identified? And, how were they narrowed down to a shortlist?

Vishaan:

We had a criterion having to do with whether they had experience in the building type and really a lot of it was working with David's (Levinson) team on who would be appropriate. Some of the most significant architects in the world were on the list. Winnowing it down to the four was hard. It was very, very hard. I encouraged David to keep it to four or five. It's not like there was one rule or selection criterion. Most of it was about a passionate understanding for what David was looking for with the project, an understanding of the importance of the site and its legacy, and enthusiasm.

Sometimes you get a very famous and very skilled architect who is so busy that they really can't dedicate the time, travel and resources that a project like this demands. That was one of the things we were really trying to assess.

Sharon:

What did the submission consist of? And, how detailed was it?

Vishaan:

It was a paid competition and we did ask for quite bit in terms of drawings, models, site plan, typical office floor plan, building analysis, structural analysis, etc. Quite a bit was included.

Sharon:

What were the architects paid?

Vishaan:

I don't know if I'm at liberty to reveal that.

(Note: We later contacted Bud Perrone, a representative of the owner, who said the costs of the competition are private. He provided the following statement about the competition submission requirements. "The range of materials that the architectural design teams submitted in the conceptual design phase (round 2) ranged from printed materials and small models that fit into the overall streetscape model, which L&L Holding had created at the outset of the competition, to larger 3ft-tall models, virtual fly-throughs and detailed renderings. Each firm invested significant time and thought in the second round as well as in follow-ups to the initial presentations. They took L&L Holding's suggestions seriously and worked hard to create solutions and designs that would work within the framework that the L&L Holding established.")

Sharon:

So this was an invited one-stage competition?

Vishaan:

No. It was two-stage. Books went out to 11. We got 9 or 10 responses back and that was simply a request for qualifications on the first go around. From there we narrowed it down to the four.

Sharon:

Why did those four stand out? And, who did the narrowing down?

Vishaan:

We did it as a group and David and I led that process. It was a combination of experience, talent, and enthusiasm. It came down to who would give us a very innovative building, who had the experience to execute that building and who had the enthusiasm for doing this project versus any number of projects they might be doing worldwide. These were the most significant factors. And then I would say there was an overarching factor which was to ensure that the competition provided us results that had a broad range. It was clear that someone like a Zaha Hadid was going to do something different from someone like a Richard Rogers. We wanted to engage that level of diversity.

Sharon:

Other than yourself, who was advising L&L Holdings on the architect selection process?

Vishaan:

In addition to me it was Mary Ann Tighe, Vin Coppola and Jennifer Raab. Again, David (Levinson) wanted a group that would engage a level of diversity. Mary Ann is from the real estate community, Vin is from the civic community, and Jennifer is the president of Hunter College and the former head of the Landmarks Commission. The way David felt about her (Jennifer's) inclusion was that this building needs to be a future landmark.

Sharon:

What can you share with us with regards the dialogue of parsing the designs and making the selection?

Vishaan:

I can't divulge any of the deliberations of the advisory committee. We had criteria about how functional the building was, how iconic the building was. To me there was a very interesting dichotomy between those entries that were more tectonic in their nature - which we saw especially from the British architects - versus those buildings that were more figural in their nature. Ultimately we really felt that Norman's building accomplished both goals. That was very important to David that the building have a tectonic expression that indicated its structure, its efficiency and so forth but at the same time was figural in the sense that it was more than a sum of its parts...that it wasn't just a machine for working but actually something that was beguiling and beautiful in its own right. And one of the things that Norman talked about very explicitly was the inclusion of public art in the building and the public view of the building in terms of its presence on the Avenue and so forth. We were very taken with that aspect of what Norman was offering.

Sharon:

It was very nice presentation this morning that Norman gave of the building.

Vishaan:

No one can present like Norman. I've seen him present a couple of times now and it's really something that all architects can learn from.

Sharon:

And it seems to be a real New York building.

Vishaan:

It is. And that I think is worth emphasizing. Norman was very much interested in doing not only a New York building but a Park Avenue building. He talked about the celebratory spaces of the setbacks. That kind of setback condition is so part and parcel of what you get on Park Avenue. So this wasn't a building that you could imagine in Dubai or Mumbai or Shanghai. This was a building that was of and for New York. And Norman was extremely explicit about that. And that I felt really resonated with the entire committee.

Sharon:

Do you know what the next steps are with regards the building and the schedule?

Vishaan:

You should talk with Bud (Perrone) about that. But David (Levinson) really wants to move forward and it's such an extraordinary opportunity to build the first full-block building on Park Avenue in decades. So David wants to move full speed ahead.

Sharon:

Other than this Vishaan, is there anything else newsworthy happening in your life at this time?

Vishaan:

I have a book that I'm just finishing up that is going to come out in the spring that is called the Country of Cities which is really a manifesto for a more urban America. In my view, if America was more urban it would be economically, environmentally and more socially better off. And in fact we can achieve that urban American by taking all the subsidies that promote suburbia away. Metropolis Books is publishing it. At Columbia I'm continuing my writing, research, and teaching. And at SHoP, were busting at the seams. We're doing an incredible amount of work. Were doing more and more international work with projects in Africa in Botswana and we're also working on a master plan for a new city outside of Nairobi.

Sharon:

I'd like to catch up with you sometime on the work you're doing at SHoP. Thanks again, for your time today, Vishaan. It's been a pleasure.

Vishaan:

Sure. Thank you!