

When Filmmakers Turn Their Cameras on Drafting Boards

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The boom of movies chronicling architecture and design leads to a vibrant festival.



Zaha Hadid/ADFF

Mr. DeMille, the design field is ready for its close-up. These days, there are enough new films about architecture, industrial, product, fashion, and graphic design to fill an entire film festival—in fact, four film festivals. That's why entrepreneur Kyle Bergman founded the Architecture and Design Film Festival in 2009 and is planning the fourth edition to open in New York this October 18-21 at Tribeca Cinemas. Bergman's programming varies widely, but is united by one thing: the idea of the "design film."

"We seek out films that focus on the process, the products, and the people who create the designed objects that we all see and use every day," says Bergman, who runs his own design/build firm, Bergman Design Team. "If a film fits that category, then we are not concerned if the filmmaker is doing this as a profession or if it's the product of a passion."

Bergman prefers for film to capture design, because "a lot of the humanity is lost in those beautifully composed stills of architecture."

The festival's movies do not merely feature design or architecture as a backdrop, like *Metropolis*, *Wings of Desire*, or *Blade Runner*. "[They] are films that are about the creative spirit of architecture and design," Bergman says. "We try to screen films that show the variety of ways to think and produce design, from buildings to products to graphics and more. These films should also be of interest to the professional and to a general audience."

This year's opening night film, *Design Is One: Lella and Massimo Vignelli* directed by Roberto Guerra and Kathy Brew, is a love letter about modern design and the Vignelli couple's 50-year marriage. Bergman also includes films that have screened at other festivals and in other countries, as well as older works that "are simply worth seeing again." The programs, about 14 in all, generally run about 90 minutes and are comprised of one or two shorts plus a feature-length film. This year's films, which will total around 30, address topics like modernism on Long Island and on the West Coast, urban renewal, a new chamber opera based on the work of Louis Kahn, and design schools of the past.

Bergman invites special guests to participate in panels and conversations, including the likes of Robert Stern, Bjarke Ingels, Jeanne Gang, Paul Goldberger, Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, Amanda Burden, David Strathairn, David Burney, Bill Moggridge, and Zoe Ryan. One of Bergman's favorite moments of the festival came last fall on opening night, when, after a screening of *Unfinished Spaces*, Ricardo

Porro—the 89-year-old Italian-Cuban architect featured in the film—talked to the audience about the passion it takes to create great buildings. "He kept saying in this great accent, 'You must fight, and fight, and fight,'" Bergman recalls. "His passion for architecture and life was infectious, and the entire audience walked out energized."

The inspiration for the festival came from Bergman's frustration over how the architectural process has been poorly chronicled. "Originally people used drawing, writing, and models to help explain design," he says. "Then still photography became the preferred method. But with still photography, it's difficult to show how light affects space over time and how proportions change as you move through space. And to my mind, one of the worst outcomes of still photography is that the exposure time for shots is so long that you can't have people in the frame, and consequently a lot of the humanity is lost in those beautifully composed stills of architecture."

He adds that with film, the narrative process can explain much of the back story of the design process and the people who have created the buildings or objects. "There are so many connections between the architect/designer and filmmaker," he says. "Both creating a film and creating a building or product are narrative acts that are told by the material choices, the relationships of public and private, and so many other choices that are made in the creation of a building or product."

The festival was a personal gamble, so Bergman's initially tested the idea in Waitsfield, Vermont, as a benefit for the Yestermorrow Design/Build School. "We knew we had something when the festival drew over 900 people to a small town in Vermont from as far away as New York, Boston, and Montreal," he says. The following two festivals took place in New York and Chicago, attracting a combined audience more than 7,000 people—"a 50/50 split of design professionals and design enthusiasts," Bergman says.

Bergman is pleased by the increasing number of films made about architecture and design, which gives him enough movies to program one strong festival per year.

Why are there so many good entries in the genre? "There are probably a number of reasons," he says, "including the fact that quality film making and editing equipment has become more affordable." The bigger factor, though, as Bergman puts it: "Design is so central to all our lives."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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