

## JJ Falk Design Is 10

by Brad Powell

**JJ Falk** just celebrated the 10th anniversary of her firm, **JJ Falk Design**. We used the occasion to catch up with her and see how things had gone in the past 10 years.

Ms. Falk grew up in Korea, where she received both her undergraduate and graduate degrees in architectural engineering. Later, upon relocating to the United States, she received a master's degree in interior architecture from the University of Colorado. She worked with IBM in Boulder doing architecture, and became acquainted with the Denver office of Gensler. Soon, she moved to New York City, and joined Gensler's New York office, where she had a "very nice transition from architecture to interiors."

She opened her firm in 1997, with herself, a draftsman, and an intern (who is now the senior designer). Subletting a space from a law firm, a huge conference room that they never used on the window side of the building, Ms. Falk put in three desks and three computers, and turned one wall into a library. And off she went.



JJ FALK

**OI: You transitioned from architecture to interiors. How did you know that was something you wanted to do, or did you just decide to try it out?**

JJ: At the time I was enrolled at University of Colorado in one of the few interior architectural programs being offered in this country. As luck would have it, I was also working with WC Muchow Architects in Boulder during the day and we had been retained to design the new IBM addition in Denver. The firm had no real interiors practice and I volunteered to apply what I was learning in school to the real world. So, basically overnight, I went from drawing stair details (by hand!) to designing interiors on a very large scale.

My education in many ways was unique in that, not only did I study architecture – with steel and concrete – but through the interiors program, I had also studied everything from space planning and tenant fit-outs, to furniture, and even signage. It gave me a broad perspective as I tried to figure out what I really wanted to do. In the end, it came down to the faster pace of interiors that intrigued me. In the world of architecture, projects take anywhere from two to two and a half years; in interior design, an entire project can be done in six months. I liked everything about it, and I was supported in my choice by many people.

By the time I had decided to move to New York, I was only pursuing interior design work.

**OI: What year did you join Gensler?**

JJ: I joined Gensler in 1985, and stayed for about three and a half years. As we all know, the mid 80's were a good time to be in architectural design, and that was certainly the case at

Gensler. It had a lot of projects with some great budgets and fees. My training in architecture and engineering provided a good platform to understand different aspects of interiors. That was my advantage, and I think I learned faster because of it.

In 1988, I joined The Phillips Janson Group (later renamed TPG Architects), a new challenge with a lot of job responsibilities. I worked my butt off there for ten years. It was another great experience for me and I hope, by looking back at some of my work for them, they were the better for it as well.

**OI: What were some of your favorite projects from Gensler/TPG period?**

JJ: Rolling Stone and NFL are the two that come to mind. I designed both of those projects while at The Phillips Group, as well as the Siegel + Gale project. At Gensler I remember a great number of law firm projects.

**OI: What's it like working with a branding firm like Siegel + Gale?**

JJ: Siegel + Gale was fantastic, but also a struggle. As designers themselves, they had high expectations, but that also meant they understood out-of-the-box thinking. It was a growing company at the time, and they had a traditional enclosed-style office. Just before that, I had had a very good experience implementing an open plan at Rolling Stone; we did the same with Siegel + Gale. It was pioneering in some ways.

**OI: Around what year was this?**

JJ: I would say 1991 or 92. As I look back at the Rolling Stone project, there were some innovative design solutions that had never been done; that's why

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remember it as a favorite. Architecture and interiors are inseparable; I love to work that way.

**OI: You also have an engineering background from Korea.**

JJ: Yes. The undergraduate program at the time in Korea was really Architecture and Engineering, with the two very closely intertwined. If you go on to graduate work in Korea, you choose a focus, be it engineering, landscaping, or something else; but I don't remember there being just a plain architecture degree.

**OI: Has your background made a difference in your practice? Do you consider it a deficiency if people don't have the same architectural/engineering background?**

JJ: I deeply respect interior design as an independent profession, but I believe that I have a complete background, which really adds value in being able to understand the infrastructure. I face it almost every day in my practice. To me, a space planner with a good amount of experience is equivalent to someone who has a good background in infrastructure who has just started working in interiors. Their capabilities have a similar value. Both types of knowledge should be available, either by combining two specialists, or by having one person with both types of knowledge.

**OI: You've worked in this field in New York for many years, and you've hired and worked with many people. Do you tend to see an interest, in those trained in interior design, to learn more about building structure and certain aspects of architecture?**

JJ: Oh, absolutely. Whenever I have a chance to talk to students in interior design, I tell them that they should spend maybe 20% of their time trying to understand what's going on behind the walls. It gives you a much better idea of what you can do with the surface.



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Regardless of your background, whether it's in architecture or interiors, your evolution in a professional makes you inquisitive about the details. As such, I think the young people that I have dealt with over the years have all naturally wanted to obtain that knowledge.

**OI: With your mix of background and experience, have you noticed a difference in how you approach a given problem?**

JJ: I would like to believe that it all serves to make my work more efficient. It seems easier to present my plans to the client, since I already know the structure behind my design. It's less problematic for me to incorporate special curves or odd shapes, or different kinds of lighting, which is so important.

With a given budget, I know I am able to maneuver things to achieve the look the client wants.

**OI: With your background, are you involved with selecting an appropriate space for a client, or do you strictly do design?**

JJ: Yes, we help clients to select spaces. With the cost of New York real estate what it is, the last thing a client wants is to negotiate a ten-year lease for additional space they don't need. Much of what we do is programming to re-define space standards based on current trends, determine square-footage requirements that will enable a client to secure a space that reflects its actual needs, and plan for expansion through the lease cycle. From a monetary point of view, this is an invaluable tool to the client to help keep costs to a minimum.

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**OI: Now here's a question I've never asked anybody else, but I'll ask you. Architects take great pride in their profession; yet as I travel around New York City, there are some fine buildings, but much of it is not impressive. Do the building shells you have to work with create frustration for you as an interior designer?**

JJ: It's a balancing act. It's hard in architecture to balance all the elements that have to be taken into account. On top of that there are environmental issues, client issues, and of course, there's a budget. And we're talking about New York, with its immense history, and all the buildings and architecture are bound up in what was happening at the time.

**OI: Yes, but all the contextualization, historicizing and material selection seems to be so much wringing of hands and architects taking themselves very seriously, especially when viewed in light of the final result of many buildings. Even the works of the most acknowledged architects are often belittled by other architects.**

JJ: I agree. A lot of the micromanaging can be attributed to the architect's

attempt to inject a little bit of their artistic ego. But I do understand that it's very hard to please all parties involved. Imagine just a single building from the outside – it's standing properly, and you could say that, given a small, skinny space, it's very well done; it's not a bad building. But when you look at how the downstairs and the first floor are being used, it just doesn't fit. How do you really judge that?

**OI: Are interiors considerations becoming more influential in building design, and are interiors professionals typically brought into the process as early and as often as they should be.**

JJ: As I have said before, in New York for the most part the buildings already exist. So our typical involvement is to design a space within the context of four existing walls. But that's the challenge: how do you make the same four walls look different, reflect the client's image, their personality, their vision. How does it continue to make a statement for five years, ten years etc.

That challenge, and the never ending goal to make that statement for the client, has been my number one obsession since the first year I created this firm. When I say that we are human-oriented, it means that we are trying to create a place where people can really live, not just a space for the sake of space.

**OI: So, what was in your mind when you decided to establish JJ Falk Design?**

JJ: Working with the previous firms, I was able to dedicate myself entirely to design. As I got older, I realized that life requires you to have other priorities. I married and became pregnant. So with all of that going on, I started to reassess my priorities in terms of how I spend my day. And I realized that, on a daily basis, doing the company thing was burning some of my personal time; so decided that I needed to

strike out on my own to afford me the opportunity to balance my life.☐

I also felt that being part of an organization was weakening my message. Part of my success was always the personal relationships I developed with Clients. Being only a cog in the wheel was making it harder to get my message across.

**OI: You thought you could do it better according to your values.**

JJ: Yes, that's how I felt. I was always really hands-on with my clients, so I developed a sense of confidence about the business side of things. I realized that my life was not how I wanted it, that my youthful ambition had sort of given way to a different kind of desire. So I told my husband that I wanted to start a little studio of my own; two people would be good enough for me. I felt like it was now or never, that if I didn't do it right then, I would regret it for the rest of my life. So I did it, and it turned out my timing was good.

**OI: What was your first job as JJ Falk Design?**

JJ: Two jobs came in simultaneously. One was from a friend who has a jewelry show in Denver; he was branching out to a shopping mall in Arizona and asked me to design it.

The second job came from a friend's mother, a media professor at FIT. Out of the blue, she told me to get in touch with the CFO of Penthouse Magazine on Park Avenue. They were moving out of their space, and she had told them about me. I met with the CFO; he was originally going to give me fifteen minutes for my first interview, but that turned into three and a half hours.

**OI: What caught his interest?**

JJ: When I met with him, I had just finished the NFL in NY and DDB Needham Headquarters in Chicago, so I had a lot of information in my head about how media companies work. It



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was a very comfortable, one-on-one setting, and I just started talking about my ideas. My references were very good, with several CEOs I'd designed for. It was just a very enthusiastic conversation, and at the end, I got the job.

Then I suddenly thought, how am I going to do this all when I have only myself? But with the help of all the good people I knew in the industry, I was able to put it together. I knew a lot of vendors I had worked with closely over the years, and they really helped me out. We moved Penthouse Magazine from 80,000 sq. ft. to 50,000 sq. ft. at Penn Plaza. That was my first job, nice and big. It gave me a lot of confidence that I could do it on my own, and it led to a lot of media company projects.

**OI: When you first started out, did you have to turn any work away because you were still too small to take it on?**

JJ: No, I never did. There were some cases where, due to the level of the project, I couldn't really help them: little mom-and-pop places. I'm a small company, but I work on a large scale; that's just what I do. I mean, I'm doing a 150,000 sq. ft. for JP Morgan Chase, and 120,000 sq. ft. for AIG.

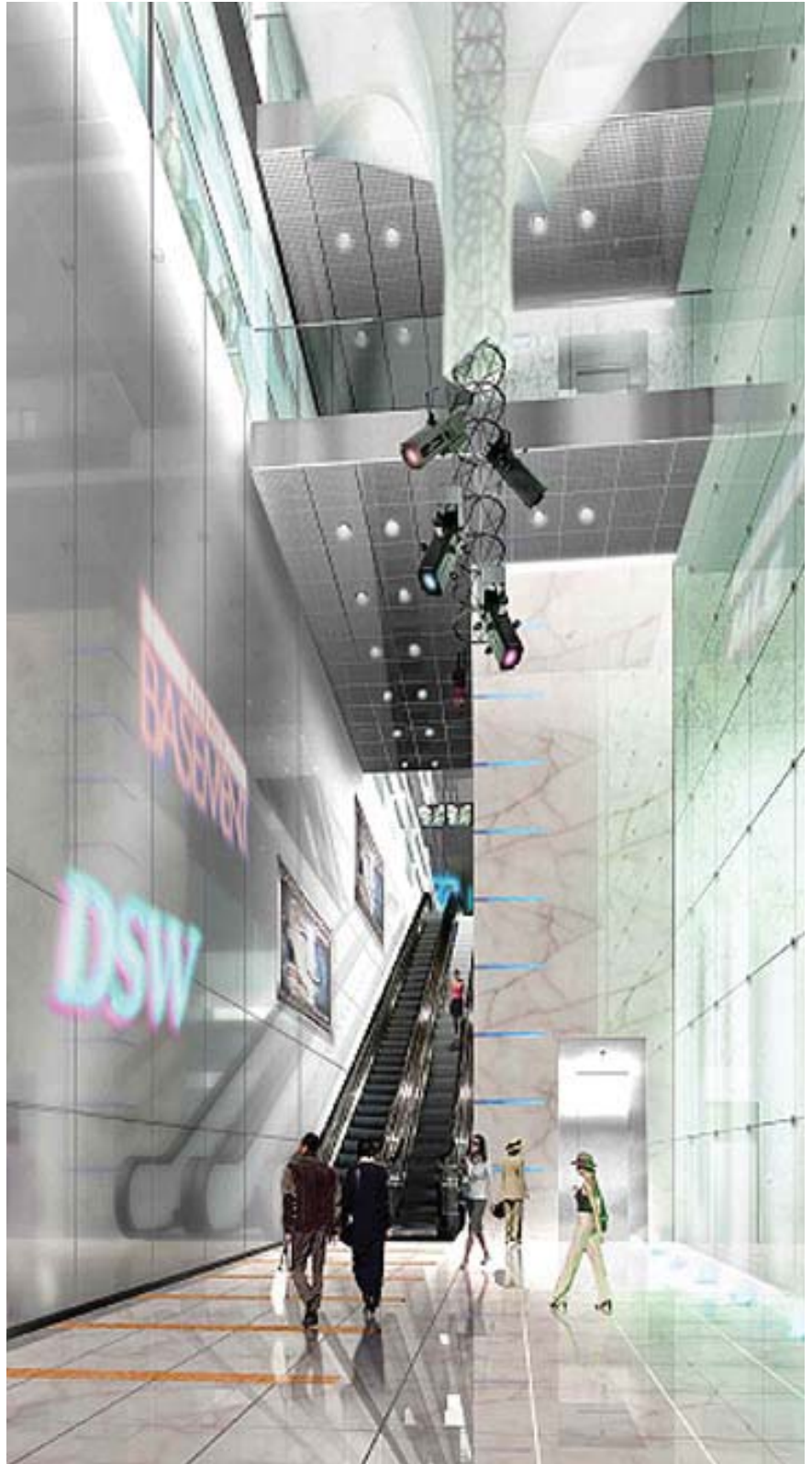
**OI: How do you feel about running the business of a design firm?**

JJ: I don't like it, I'm a full time designer at heart, but I don't know how to separate that out from the rest of what I do. That's a problem I guess we all face as the firm grows and the need to delegate responsibility to succeed. Having said that, you can be sure no design decisions happen here without me knowing about it!

**OI: Where do you get your work?**

JJ: Word of mouth, and more than 60% of our clients are repeat clients.

**OI: Your sign reads JJ Falk Design, Architecture and Interiors. How many**



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**of your professional staff are architects and how many are interior designers?**

JJ: It's about two-to-one right now. So there are about twelve who are trained as architects, and about six as interior designers. About five are registered. We also have two administrators and two interns.

I train my architects to have a designer's mindset. They're not picking the finishes on furniture or anything, but they understand what it means to develop a holistic design. They're not just managing architecture. If they consider the interior, they can make the whole building much more usable and flexible.

**OI: What is the reputation of JJ Falk Design? What would you like to be known for?**

JJ: What I hope people say about us is that we are able to provide every service they need, that we're pleasant to work with and very human-oriented. We are focused on workplace design, and we give people a creative solution. I'm proud of the fact that we don't have a "signature look." All of our clients are individual entities, and therefore, their offices should reflect that individuality.

**OI: What do you aspire to do that you haven't been able to do yet?**

JJ: I'd love to do the total branding of a company's space from the very beginning. I lost a chance to do that with DoubleClick back in the late 90's. They were a new company looking for a huge space, with an eye toward more growth in the future. I

think it would have been an interesting challenge.

I'd also love to partner with a serious architecture company, to sort of integrate with them in the sense that when they need interior design, they come to us, and vice-versa.

**OI: So, what has been the greatest reward in your ten years as JJ Falk Design?**

JJ: The satisfaction of the work. We know what we can do, and even when things are challenging, we know we are working for the client from the bottom of our heart. I don't have to say or do anything I don't believe in, and in the world of architects and designers, not too many people can say that. I always tell my people to stay aware of their original intention, the idea of what it is we wanted to do. I don't want them to go out and do something that doesn't ring true. It's really important when I hire someone that I feel like they know who I am and who they're working with.

**OI: Who are you?**

JJ: I'm a very straightforward person. I have the greatest respect for the client, who has given me an opportunity, and I give them my absolute best performance. As a service professional, they are paying for my talent and my experience. I know it sounds simple, but this industry can seem so complicated at times that it's easy to lose sight of that kind of basic understanding.

**OI: Looking back, are you happy you made the move?**

JJ: I'm definitely happy that I did. There are always difficulties, but it's still a joy. I'm also really thankful to all the clients I have met and to all the people in this firm and in this industry, as they have been major factors in my confidence to continue in design.



**OI: What has changed for you over the past twenty years?**

JJ: I have less time to design. Occasionally it's tempting to let myself be swallowed by one of the bigger companies, because of course, they would be the ones taking care of the business side of things. I try and delegate as much as I can, and we are as efficient as possible; I just trust that I'm working with good, capable people that are doing what they can to free up my time as much as possible.

**OI: Have there been any recent trends that tangibly affect how you do business or what you hope to achieve over time?**

JJ: For a long, long time I've incorporated feng shui into my practice; even the people at Rolling Stone might remember some of that input. But I don't market myself that way, and I don't really talk about it. The reason that my projects stay up for twenty years and that I get return clients is because we don't follow trends. I believe in creativity and imagery that belongs to the client. As far as so-called green design goes, I've been practicing that for a long time; it's just how I believe things should be done.

I'm supporting more professional organizations now. I've been a supporting member of USGBC, and have been participating in IIDA as a committee chair for years. I just think that's a good direction for me. Like I said, I don't follow trends, but what-

**JJ FALK 10 YEAR CELEBRATION**

ever comes up that is really of value to clients and to the profession, I would like to play an active role in.

**OI: What do you have to say about the people in your firm?**

JJ: We have such hardworking people, and they tend to stay with us for a very long time. The designers are given a lot of respect and individual freedom, even if I'm leading the way. Some of them have left us to explore other opportunities, but after a year I might get a call from them saying they want to come back, which is a very nice thing to hear.

**OI: What are the best examples of your work as the JJ Falk Design firm, and why do you like it?**

JJ: Every design is one of the best examples of our work, or it wouldn't leave my office. There are many projects, JP Morgan Chase, AIG, New York Life, Covenant House, the list goes on. I'll give you a specific example: Six years ago we designed three floors for a media company – Horizon Media. Part of what we were able to do for them was to develop a corporate identity that they loved. Since then, they have called us back to expand that image to another floor they leased, and then another, and another, and then to another building etc, etc. It's very rewarding to have a client that appreciates what you do, And it sure doesn't hurt to say that it's also a heck of a lot of fun. ■