

CITY OF BOSTON POL





DAVID L. RYAN/BOSTON GLOBE

Stephen Chung '91 is bringing modern design to historic Boston—and architectural savvy to a television audience.



STEPHEN CHUNG '91 knows that beneath the surface of the buttoned-down, traditional style of Boston lies a yearning for modern design that will bring the city's historic structures into the 21st century. | As the design director of Urbanica, a Boston-based design/development firm, he's helping to spearhead a modern design revolution in the city—breathing life into Boston's deteriorating buildings by transforming the underutilized spaces into icons of modern living. | A dramatic conversion of Boston's former D-4 police station (left)—built in the 1930s—into 26 luxury residential units is currently the firm's most high-profile project. Called YooD4, the undertaking is a collaborative effort between Urbanica and world-renowned designer Philippe Starck, best known for his highly acclaimed hotel designs, including The Hudson in New York City, The Mondrian in Los Angeles, and The Delano in Miami, as well as restaurants, retail spaces, and products for the home. BY AMBER CLEVELAND



Urbanica's most high-profile project, YooD4.

URBAN PIONEER

“ESSENTIALLY URBANICA TAKES OVER BUILDINGS IN DISREPAIR, RESTORES THE OUTWARD HISTORIC SHELL, AND INFUSES THEM WITH MODERN DESIGN. IT’S A FORMULA THAT WORKS REALLY WELL IN BOSTON.”

Chung is designing the work being done to the building’s exterior architecture, which entails carefully restoring the existing structure, as well as fabricating a steel and glass addition—he’s converting the one-time jail cells into an ivy-covered, four-story, glass courtyard located in the middle of the building. The new space will provide each YooD4 resident with a small gardening plot and an abundance of natural sunlight.

The building’s interior design—styled by Starck in collaboration with Chung—is as dramatic as the edifice itself. A model unit showcases black crystal chandeliers, marble-covered bathrooms, an alcove that reads “Sweet Dreams” in one wall of the master bedroom, mirrors that flash words in pink or blue neon, bamboo floors, and (of course) Starck’s signature oversized flowerpots.

Scheduled to open this spring, YooD4 has caused quite a stir, and the units are selling rapidly. And while the Starck-styled interiors, the vibrant courtyard, and the adaptive reuse of the one-time empty building have been drawing praise, some are hesitant to embrace the progressive design.

“I’ve found that homeowner clients typically are far less adventurous than commercial or institutional clients,” says Chung. “I think some homeowners are wary of non-traditional design. They tend to look at their house as an investment, and worry about standing out too much.”

Chung’s career has been about educating and inspiring ever-widening audiences—from Bostonians to prospective television viewers across the country—about the beauty and livability of modern architectural design.

He started his first practice, called MODA Architects, during the height of the Internet boom in the late 1990s. A soaring stock market, an emerging class of young people with money to spend, and a growing interest in home renovation and design presented Chung the perfect environment to start a practice that capitalized on his specialty in high-end, modern design—a style not often associated with the historic, conservative architecture in his hometown of Boston.

“There were a lot of young people in Boston at that time who wanted to build really interesting, edgy residential loft spaces, especially where I was in the artistic South End,” he recalls. “For me, as a modernist, it was a great time to be practicing because there was so much happening in the city.”

The subsequent Internet bust and economic downturn shifted the priorities of prospective homebuilders from spectacular spaces to more conventional quarters. But the residential market in Boston continued to thrive, and Chung’s passion for progressive design had only begun to flourish.

After a few years of practicing design on a smaller scale, Chung began working with developers on the construction of large multi-unit residential buildings which housed condominiums, lofts, and townhouses. He quickly found himself frustrated.

As a designer, his involvement with the projects didn’t start until well after the construction was under way, leaving him little opportunity to make an impact on the final outcome of each endeavor.

“Developers really ran the show when it came to the construction aspects of new projects—at a certain point I felt more like a decorator, coming in after the building was configured and then essentially styling it. To me that was a real problem,” he says. “Some architects might equate working with developers to ‘getting their hands dirty,’ but I’ve found it to be a proactive way to get more involved and gain more control in the process—as strictly an architect I was frustrated by not having enough decision-making capabilities.”

Then he met Kamran Zahedi, now president of Urbanica, who at that time was a local real estate developer. Chung says Zahedi “really cared about the quality of the design in his projects and wanted to be involved in the architecture aspect as well as development.” The two agreed to start a partnership.

“Essentially Urbanica takes over buildings in disrepair, restores the outward historic shell, and infuses them with modern design,” says Chung. “It’s a formula that works really well in Boston because the city is so conservative, and people like the look of the old shell. At the

same time, I don’t feel like I’m betraying myself as a modernist because I get to do progressive design on the interiors.”

Chung is quick to point out that whenever possible Urbanica tries to go beyond simply restoring the outside of the buildings.

“We try to push for building additions as much as possible, and we work out our suggestions with the local government and historic commissions on a case-by-case basis, because we need to preserve the exteriors of the building,” he says. “When we get approval to add a modern addition, we’re very mindful about doing it artfully so that it respects the existing structure, but also possesses its own identity at the same time.”

Unlike typical architectural firms, Chung says clients generally don’t call Urbanica; the company generates its own work. Many of their projects are obtained through design competitions that make vacant city-owned buildings available for development. Other times the company partners with outside design/development firms in the private sector.

Along with YooD4, Urbanica’s work can be found across the city in a range of revamped spaces—from a dilapidated 24,000-square-foot warehouse that was converted into 22 artist loft spaces with a ground floor gallery in Chelsea; to a decrepit police station in Somerville that was revamped into 14 residential units with high ceilings and minimalist detail; to a former fire station in Belmont currently being transformed into six townhouse units with oversized windows and a striking copper addition.

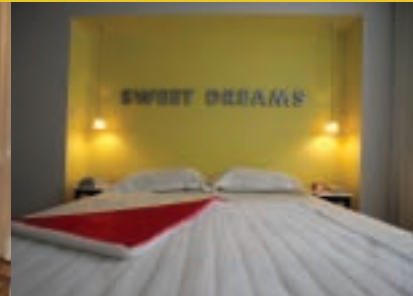
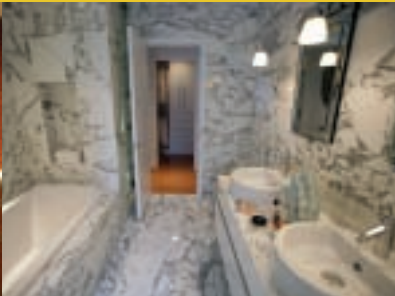
Chung calls some Bostonians “closet modernists.” Citing an example, he says, “Outwardly many of the city’s residents live in historic brownstone homes and seem to favor very traditional design, but in contrast to the classic-looking exteriors, the interiors of their home are distinctly modern.”

School of Architecture Dean Alan Balfour agrees. “In all ways—including architecture—Boston seems conservative, but increasingly, just below the surface is a sense of a new and youthful reality that will slowly transform the city,” he says. “Stephen’s work is very much a part of this transformation. He has created a truly innovative practice.”



SUZANNE KREITER/BOSTON GLOBE

The Engine1 project will convert a former fire station into six townhouse units.



The interiors of YooD4 (above) and Engine1 (right) share Urbanica's trademark progressive style.

