

MKCA's airy office combines clean lines with a refreshingly punchy color palette.  
Photo by Max Burkhalter

PHOTOGRAPHY

# Tour Architect Michael K. Chen's Colorfully Reimagined Studio

By Anna Fixsen  
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Though a fire destroyed his studio, the New York–based architect leveraged the moment to create his dream office

When you make your way to Michael K. Chen's architecture studio, you unwittingly catch glimmers of a rapidly disappearing New York. Set within an early 20th-century tower along a stretch of Broadway in the East 30s, it was once one of many spaces in the neighborhood bustling with wholesalers peddling showy accessories and jewelry. A recent spate of luxury hotel towers has driven many of these businesses out, but on the way up to Chen's loft, parting elevator doors offer glimpses into the holdouts, packed floor-to-ceiling with gold bangles, bedazzled handbags, and boxed perfumes.



Michael K. Chen formed his namesake architecture firm in 2011. Despite a devastating setback, he hasn't looked back.  
Photo by Max Burkhalter

Chen has an affinity for these liminal spaces, which is why he opted to move his studio here a year and a half ago. “I’ve always lived adjacent to some proper neighborhood in the weird, we-don’t-know-what-to-call-that part,” he explains. “People always ask, ‘What neighborhood is your office in?’ I don’t know—Koreatown? NoMad? I find that to be really interesting.”

Delight in such blurred boundaries underpins Chen's design philosophy, too. Since founding [Michael K. Chen Architecture](#) (MKCA) in his apartment in 2011, the six-person practice has a spectrum of projects under its belt, ranging from micro apartments to a pro bono children's [library](#) in the Bronx and—soon—a private apartment in a cruise ship. The firm has garnered notoriety in recent years for its breathtaking refurb of [townhouses](#) on the Upper East Side and beyond.

But to admire these projects for their beauty alone does the work a disservice—at MKCA, each design challenge becomes a research project in miniature. Case in point: When one client requested a vertical garden, Chen and his team turned it into an opportunity to [study](#) urban ecosystems, one that necessitated some very rare ferns and the involvement of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

“We’re not artists, we’re cat herders,” Chen insists. “We’re wranglers, we’re coordinators, we’re conductors. To me, our work is really interesting when it has many voices—especially those that normally wouldn’t communicate with one another.”



All MKCA studio members congregate around a communal desk.  
Photo by Max Burkhalter

We’re sitting at a [Muuto](#) conference table in Chen's airy, 1,400-square-foot loft. It's a dreary afternoon, but the space feels cozy with rain drumming on the window panes in concert with Angel Olsen on the stereo. The table is laid out with palm-size pebble-like objects—studies for a table—and a variety of globe lights to be part of a chandelier the studio is designing with [Ladies & Gentleman Studio](#). Chen wears an abstract blue-and-white [Kenzo](#) button-down (he was classmates with Carol Lim and Humberto Leon at UC Berkeley before earning an M.Arch. from Columbia University in 2001) and graphic black glasses.

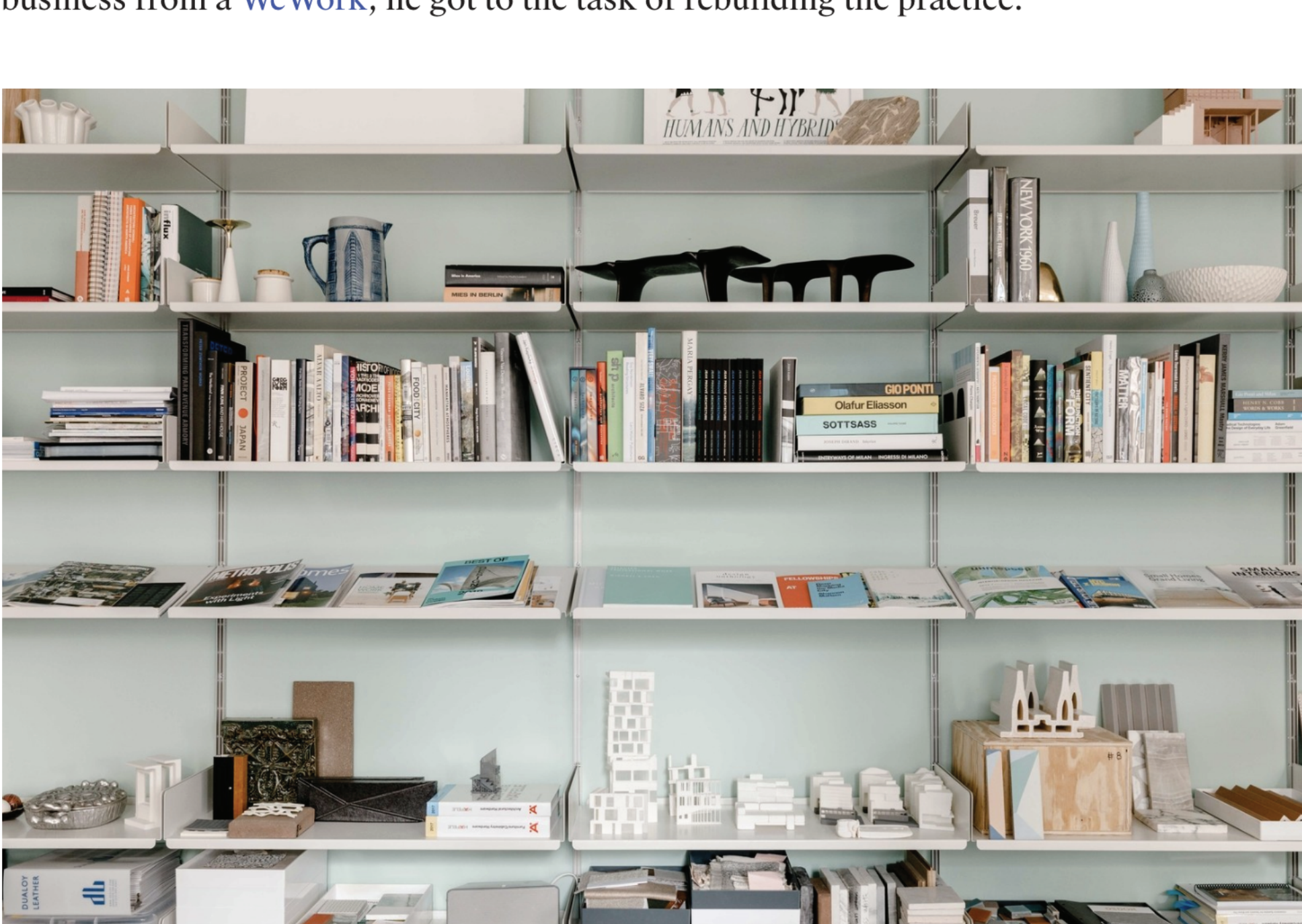
Chen is busy. He is preparing to go to Spain to check in on the cruise ship project. The studio is also working on an architecture library at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where Chen has been teaching since 2004, not to mention juggling the design of a new pediatric clinic in Bushwick, renovations of townhouses in the East Village and on the Upper East Side, a micro-unit system for German hardware company Hafele, and a restoration of a sprawling 10-bedroom house in [Southampton](#) straight out of *Grey Gardens*.



A Muuto conference table is packed with architectural models and furniture prototypes.  
Photo by Max Burkhalter

It's a welcome kind of chaos, considering that less than two years ago Chen nearly lost all that he built. Over Labor Day weekend in 2017, while vacationing with his husband on the North Fork, Chen received a text message from a friend: His office building, then located in Tribeca, was [engulfed in flames](#). Nearly 200 firefighters reported to the scene, and though there were no fatalities, Chen's office was completely destroyed—not from the flames but by the thousands of gallons of water pumped into the building to quell the blaze a few stories above. Thankfully, the firm's files were stored in the Cloud (“Now I am an evangelist for backups,” Chen says wryly), but everything else—books, computers, furniture, models, artwork from friends—was a sodden mess.

Chen could have justifiably called it quits or taken some much-needed time off. But after the initial shock subsided, Chen began to realize that the fire afforded his team the opportunity to rebuild their firm the way they always wanted. “We had a chance to have conversations about how we wanted to work and the kinds of things we wanted to do that we never could do before,” he says. Chen wasted little time and while running the business from a [WeWork](#), he got to the task of rebuilding the practice.



A Dieter Rams shelving unit holds models, prototypes, and books. “Architecture has changed incredibly since the advent of digital tools,” Chen muses. “I often tell students the discipline of architecture is changing faster than it did in the Renaissance.”  
Photo by Max Burkhalter

The resulting MKCA office differs in a lot of ways from your typical architecture studio—most noticeably in its happy embrace of color. The walls are awash in pale gray, forest green, and burgundy. Pops of color abound in the furniture and artwork, too, such as a coral red [Knoll](#) sofa designed by Kazuhide Takahama, [Jean Prouvé](#) chairs with spearmint frames, and a cluster of verdant tropical plants in terra-cotta planters. Strategic color placement is emblematic of the studio's work, but “not in a zany way,” Chen explains. For the new office, in particular, he says, “I was consciously trying to avoid that architecture cliché of working in a white space.”

Chen also wanted to avoid the cliché of top-down organizational structure at most architecture firms. So the staff clusters around a single custom bleached-ash table, alongside generous south-facing windows. “My desk isn't different from an intern's desk. That was important to me,” he says.

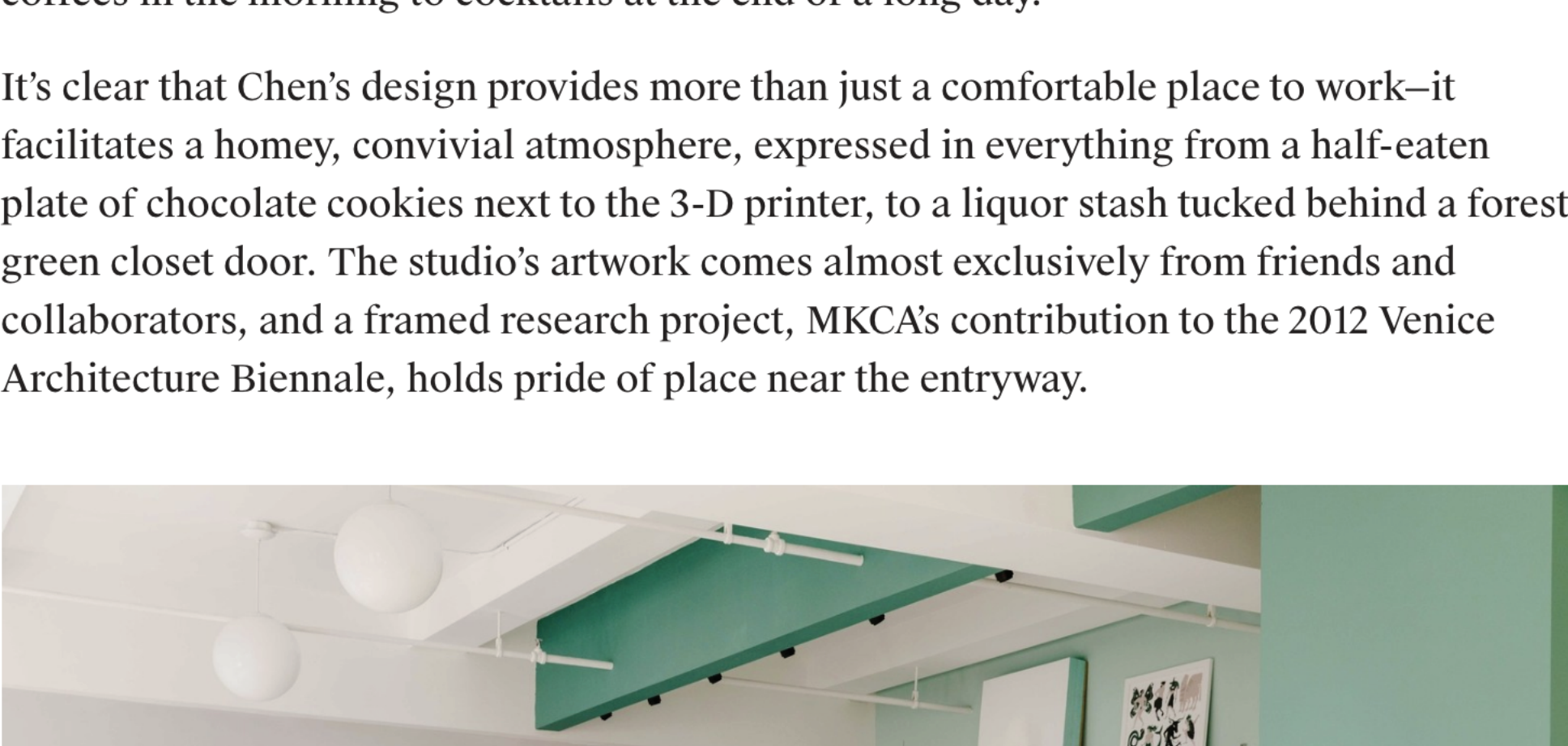


The MKCA office layout lends itself to collaboration. It's also filled with prototypes and treasures, like this vintage tubular Robert Sonneman lamp (right).  
Photos by Max Burkhalter



The office's most dynamic element is a custom-built island adjacent to the communal desk. This bar, made from maroon lacquered wood and topped with a sleek black Corian slab, supports a 3-D printer and provides space for reviewing drawings, fiddling with material samples, and creating models. Chen sees it as a transition point between the studio's digital and physical work. The setup also lends itself to a domestic rhythm, from coffees in the morning to cocktails at the end of a long day.

It's clear that Chen's design provides more than just a comfortable place to work—it facilitates a homey, convivial atmosphere, expressed in everything from a half-eaten plate of chocolate cookies next to the 3-D printer, to a liquor stash tucked behind a forest green closet door. The studio's artwork comes almost exclusively from friends and collaborators, and a framed research project, MKCA's contribution to the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale, holds pride of place near the entryway.



A Corian-topped bar is the office's ad hoc fabrication and social hub.  
Photo by Max Burkhalter

This tight-knit feel is demonstrated in the loyalty of MKCA's employees, many of whom were Chen's former students at Pratt. Braden Caldwell, who has been working at the firm for seven years, considers Chen both “an excellent boss and friend.” Natasha Harper had Chen as a thesis adviser and has been at MKCA full time since 2015. “He has fostered an environment that is collaborative, where everyone has a voice,” she wrote in an email. “It is no accident that everyone who works here is incredibly talented, hardworking, and committed to producing beautiful and well-considered projects.” Sometimes this commitment can verge on extreme: In the aftermath of the fire, a few employees snuck into the decimated office to remove their server, a few computers, and a set of beloved Bourelecc chairs.

Back at the shared desk, Caldwell clicks through photos of a prewar townhouse he is refurbishing in the East Village. Though it occupies a covetable address near St. Mark's Church, the once-grand building sat vacant for at least 20 years and is defined by peeling paint, graffiti-covered windows, and mouldering floors. “Fixer-upper” would be a gross understatement. But the project marks yet one more puzzle to be solved, one more research opportunity for Chen and his team.

It's this same curiosity that accounts for MKCA's successful reincarnation. “It took a second to get settled here and feel like, from a business perspective, that the office was where it needed to be,” Chen reflects. “For the last year, we’ve been humming along.”