Ignacio Ciocchini

Industrial Designer and Vice President, Design for the Bryant Park Corporation, Chelsea Improvement Company, and 34th Street Partnership

Conducted by Edward Styles on December 2, 2011 at the 34th Street Partnership offices, 1065 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York

Born in 1969 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Ignacio Ciocchini studied industrial design at the University of Buenos Aires. He is the head designer for three leading New York City Business Improvement Districts, the 34th Street Partnership, the Bryant Park Corporation, and the Chelsea Improvement Company. In these public/private partnerships, Ciocchini has worked with local building owners, businesses, and city agencies as he directs the design of architectural, landscape, environmental, and graphic design projects aimed at neighborhood revitalization and economic development. His special focus has been streetscapes and public spaces. Ciocchini's designs have been featured in museum and gallery exhibitions, including the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum in New York City, and he has received numerous awards for his work, among them 2012 Good Design awards for two of the projects discussed in this interview, the CityBench and the Bryant Park litter receptacles. Ciocchini speaks about his education and career; designing for urban spaces; the complexities of Building Improvement District [BID] projects; the importance of user experience; design research methodology and ergonomics; materials and sustainability; and patents and manufacturing. Additional projects discussed include the Chelsea Streetscape Collection, the O Bikerack, and prototypes for public phone kiosks and solar charging stations.

Edward Styles (ES): This is Edward Styles, Master's student at Bard Graduate Center. I'm here with Ignacio Ciocchini at 1065 Avenue of the Americas on December 2, 2011. Could you start by pronouncing your full name for me?

Ignacio Ciocchini (IC): My full name is Ignacio Ciocchini.

ES: And when were you born?

IC: I was born on April 9, 1969.

ES: Where was that?

IC: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

ES: What is your family background?

IC: My father is a medical doctor, a general surgeon. When I was born we lived in Buenos Aires, a big city. My dad was specializing in surgery at the time, but when we moved to a smaller city in 1976 he became more of a general doctor as well because that was what the town needed. They only had four other doctors I think. He once told me he almost went into studying naval engineering, and I'm not surprised, I can see him doing that also. My mom is an English and art history teacher; she likes music, oil paintings, sculpture and architecture. She was always taking us to museums and playing Beatles records when we were children. I have three younger brothers. My grandfather [Cleto Ciocchini] on my father's side was an artist, he is considered one of the best twentieth-century Argentine oil painters; he painted the working man, sailors and fishermen from Mar del Plata especially. On my mom's side, my grandfather was a violinist in a tango orchestra and also worked in customs for the Port Authority of Buenos Aires. They had many children, one had seven and the other had five. Both of my grandmas were school teachers but with so many children I think they stayed at home most of the time.

ES: What was your favorite subject in primary school?

IC: Primary school, oh wow. Favorite subject in primary school— Not sure I had one that sticks out. I was into biology and drawing, more into the science and drawing side of things rather than history or math.

ES: At what point did you, or how did you, choose to attend Universidad de Buenos Aires?

IC: Well, it was more of a choice of career that influenced where I would go. In Buenos Aires right now you have a lot more options, a lot more universities to choose from, especially private ones that have been created lately. But when I was about to choose a university, the options weren't that many. I finished high school in 1986. I really had no idea what to study, but looking back I

realize that I was always making things, taking products apart, drawing, and taking art classes. Without realizing it, I was doing many things that related to industrial design. My dad is a surgeon but he has an amazing mechanical ability. He likes building things. He always wanted to go into designing prosthetic arms and legs but he was never able to do that. He was always fixing things around the house. I grew up in front of a factory. Right in front of my house there was a factory of equipment and machines for the agro industry. I was trying to build all these things when I was in high school, from twelve to eighteen. I remember being caught in class many times by teachers when I was not paying attention because I was drawing in class. They would ask me a question; I knew the answer but I just wasn't listening to the class. I was drawing on my own. And I would not necessarily draw just art. I liked drawing mechanical things also—mechanical systems. You know, you move a lever here and something else moves there. I was building mechanical pinballs out of wood parts in my house. And then I built four or five prototypes by the time I was thirteen or fourteen. All my friends would come and play because the pinball would function pretty much like an electronic machine but it was all with mechanical parts, and it was free. Of course my dad was helping me. I would go to the guys at the factory with a drawing and ask, "Can you do this?" You know, I was twelve. "You know, we can't really do that but how about we do this?" "Oh yeah, sure, that's fine!" And then there was a wood shop that I would go to where they would cut up the parts and I would put them together with the metal ones. I loved my drawing class and also liked physics. Not so much mathematics. I never liked the math for the sake of math; that never interested me. But applied physics was always very interesting because I could relate to being able to explain why things happened in the material world, rather than just abstract mathematical thinking. I wasn't interested in that so much. Still, my grades in math were good, and in physics were good. I also liked biology a lot when I was in high school.

ES: So when you went to University, what were the courses or who were the professors that most influenced you?

IC: I would say Ricardo Blanco who is the guy who created the industrial design curriculum in Argentina. I went to the School of Architecture, Design and Urbanism that is part of the University of Buenos Aires. You could go there and study architecture, graphic design, fashion design, textile design, cinematography, or industrial design. The career was actually created not many years before I started as a student, so it was a new option that was available to the people of Buenos Aires. I had no idea industrial design existed as a career. When I was seventeen, I was in my fifth year in high school, the last year in Argentina, and I remember we had this course, this vocational course to help you decide what you were good at, what you liked, but it wasn't really well done. The teacher was really bad. She would just dictate; I don't understand what she was

trying to do; it was a bad class. I remember the director of our school walking into our class once, maybe because someone complained. So she walks in and she sits down and looks at the teacher. Ten minutes after she stops her and says, “This is all you do? Dictate to them all the time? Do you really think this is effective?” So she stopped the class; she stood up and started asking one by one: “What are you going to do? What are you planning to study?” It was the right question! We were all six months away from having to make that choice. When she got to me I realized I didn’t know, so I just said architecture. And she went, “Well do you know there’s no work? There’s no future for architecture in this country. Do you really want to do that?” I had the highest grades in her class, she was the School’s Director but she was also my biology teacher. She was disappointed. “You’re really good in biology; your dad is a medical doctor. Are you sure you want to be an architect?” So I started getting nervous. I went back and spoke to my parents about what had happened. They asked, “Would you like to take a private vocational class that is better?” I said, “Yes, sure.” I went to Buenos Aires to take a class that a friend of my parents recommended.

ES: Where were you living? What was the name of the city?

IC: General Pinto. Like General Pinto [English pronunciation]. 10,000 people lived in this town, very small town. That’s where I grew up and where the factory I told you about was located. So, once in Buenos Aires, I met this psychologist who was teaching these vocational one-on-one classes and giving the usual IQ tests, but her class wasn’t only about figuring out what you were good at or how intelligent you were. It was also about what you were interested in, what you liked doing. She got to know me very well, and at the end she said, “Look, music and design are at the top of your interest. If you’re not going to be a professional musician, then you should be an industrial designer.” I said, “A what?” She said, “You should read this,” and she gave me a lot of stuff to read, that I read, and she was right, I loved it. Thank you very much. I had no idea you could do this for a living. There were other science-related interests on the list, like geology and anthropology, but they were lower on the list. I was also considering engineering for a while but I did not see the art side in it, I really needed that side also. It was first music, then industrial design. So I went into industrial design and I really liked it. I think I was lucky to bump into her, she figured me out so well. I could have seen myself changing careers a bunch of times because I really wasn’t sure. I don’t think architecture was quite for me either because I was more into inventing things at product scale and was interested in how people use things and how to make them easier to use or maybe find new features that would make them better.

ES: Did the coursework and the educational pedagogy in your courses at university go along with the way you had been designing products as a teenager? Or was it a different process?

IC: It was different. You know, when you're a teenager, a lot of what you do is based on intuition, and it's great. Now, I wish I could get myself back to that in some way because you're doing things and you're not thinking about them so much. Stuff comes out that's more natural perhaps. Also you don't know much about materials, you don't have the technical background and you don't have the experience that helps you make decisions. When I started industrial design, my problem was never coming up with ideas. My problem was deciding which idea to work with, because I had too many. I would go to my teacher with so many sketches that they would send me back and say, "Look, you can't come back to me with a hundred ideas. Narrow it down to ten and then I'll help you." And it was so tough for me to do that.

ES: Can you give an example of a couple of objects you were designing in university that you remember?

IC: During the first year they give you very simple products to design. As a student you think you're designing a product but the teachers don't really care about the product you come up with; it's more about teaching you the process of design. They try to teach you how to get from an idea to an actual product that could be manufactured and become a commercial success. During my first studio class they gave us the assignment of designing letter openers. We had to design three versions: one of a laminar construction, linear, and volumetric. We had to tackle the same product in three different ways. So they made us go through the motions, sketches, preliminary designs, design development, and materials. The teacher was trying to help me narrow down the ideas but also trying to help me learn how I could do that on my own, how I could sort through my own thoughts and choose the best design direction to proceed with. It was tough for me to commit to one idea and leave all the other ones aside. Other students would get stuck on one idea and could not come up with more, so the teacher would help them start thinking in a different way until they could open up and explore more options. Some of them had trouble coming up with more ideas because they couldn't let go of the first ones they came up with. I always had the opposite problem. Seeing them coming up with solutions for their struggles helped me come up with solutions for mine, different but related problems. At the end of the class we made prototypes, but during that first year it didn't really matter if the end product was good or if it was marketable. The teachers tried to slowly teach us the different steps of the creative process, making it more and more complex as the years went by, adding more variables, visual and oral presentation,

production processes, technical drawings, ergonomics, costs, patents, marketing, packaging, regulations, business basics, pricing, shipping strategy, etc.

ES: Was most of the course work individual? Or was there also group work?

IC: There was a mix, but most of it was individual. Now they have more group projects but at the time maybe 70% of the design exercises were individual.

ES: What was your first experience with a business or organization that did design outside of University, whether an internship or job?

IC: When I went to Buenos Aires I couldn't afford to get an apartment on my own. Universities there don't have a campus like they do here. Now some private universities have them, but this was a national university. School was free, no tuition. You had to pay for all the books and materials of course. I ended up going to a university residence. It's much like a campus but it's run by an organization that is independent from any school. You go there and you have a library, a place to study, a gym, a swimming pool and your shared room with a desk and a bed. You have your responsibilities. They give you very minimal stuff to do to create a sense of community. I was responsible for helping catalog books at the library for example. You pay your monthly fee and you get four meals a day and someone that cleans your room. My dad was paying for that. There were about 150 guys that lived there, all from different provinces in Argentina. "Residencia Universitaria San Jose" was run by a Catholic priest so there were no girls allowed, just guys. By the time I was finishing my degree, there was a guy who was studying law who I became friends with. He had this idea for a product and was willing to invest money. The idea was this bookstand for law students. His point was that lawyers always had these huge heavy books to study with. They are too large, clumsy to work with and read from. You can't really hold them at an angle for too long, your arms become tired. At that time in Argentina there was no good option for holding that type of book, so he said, "Why don't you design something? I'll give you the sizes and weight of books to work with." Because a lot of other careers, like medicine and engineering had similar books, I though the idea had potential. So I actually designed one, drew plans, made a prototype. He paid me, not a lot of money, but he paid me.

ES: Do you remember how much he paid you?

IC: He paid me $800 pesos, which for him was a lot of money. He wasn't working; he was in the same situation I was, he was trying to graduate. His dad was paying for the university residence and he was maybe enrolled in an unpaid internship in a law firm while taking some of his final

classes. We would meet up after class and go through sketches and discuss ideas. We went through the market and the products that were available were not that expensive so we bought some units and tested them. In the university residence, many of the products were being used by these 150 guys. I was able to interview them, and said, “Hey, what do you think about your bookstand?” The prototype I built was tested by many students and it worked very well, it ended up being one of the best products in my portfolio because it was as good as my last project in school but it was a real one. The computer bookstand you are using right now has some common features with the one I designed, by the way.

ES: Interesting.

IC: Yeah. I was able to apply everything I had learned to something real, something that was simple, a product that didn’t have any electrical components or any expensive plastic parts that required expensive molds. So I built a prototype myself where all the parts were the actual materials. It was just steel and some nylon parts, perforated steel, and stainless steel. I lost contact with my friend, and client, but the last time I saw him he was shopping around the parts, trying to get pricing to bring the product to market. So that was exciting.

ES: When did you move from Argentina to the United States?

IC: I first came to the United States to visit my girlfriend at the time, who is now my wife. She was trying to pursue modern dance professionally. She was also in school in Buenos Aires taking classes to become an accountant like her dad. It came to a point where she didn’t have time to take accounting and dance classes at the same time. She decided to give dance, as a professional career, a try. She tried in Argentina for a while and then one day she came to me and said, “I’m going to New York to study English, and I have to give dance a try. I don’t like what’s going on over here.” We were in love; I was really concerned I would never see her again. So she came to New York to take classes and see what was going on. I came to visit her in the mid-1990s while she was still taking classes and auditioning everywhere she could.

ES: What were your impressions of the city?

IC: I thought it was a very exciting city. Argentina at the time was a tough place— When I was in college, the country went through hyperinflation, close to 400%. This meant that prices would double from one day to the other. So people were cashing their paychecks and going to the supermarket the same day because literally the next day you would spend double your money for the same stuff. I remember my dad giving me a phone call one day and telling me, “So what are

you doing besides taking your college classes?" Well I was doing a bunch of things, taking English classes, tennis classes, and prototyping classes. He said, "Well, I'm really sorry but you have to drop everything but the university, get your degree and get a job as fast as you can because I can't afford this anymore." I said "Okay, I get it." I dropped all my extra curriculum classes. It was very a depressing environment. I wasn't expecting to get a job; it was tough to plan a future, it was very stressful. Argentina wasn't the type of place where you could plan your career as much as you do here in the US. If you're an industrial designer here, you can say, "I want to do automotive design; I want to do packaging; I want to do consumer products; I want to do sustainable things. I want to be more in the architecture side." There, it was more about getting your hands on anything that was available. So when I came over here, I actually saw the opposite. While I was visiting my girlfriend, I went to some design companies and saw a lot of young guys, doing really good things, planning their careers. I said, wow, this is great. New York has a lot of energy; you can feel it in the street. People are moving, doing things. You see it in their faces. There's a purpose. They're going somewhere to do something they care about. I saw that right away and I wanted it for me. I didn't want to walk around moping, thinking, oh my God! Am I going to make enough money? Or, am I going to have a job? I did over thirty-five interviews in Argentina and didn't get any offers. It was terrible. I ended up working but I wasn't working in design. I was doing things related to design but I wasn't designing and I was very depressed about what my prospects for the future were because I was very much the guy who studied design to be a designer. I wanted to be in it to design products. I wasn't thinking about going into a related field like marketing or advertising or to be involved in design peripherally. No, I wanted to be inventing something.

ES: So what else did you do in New York?

IC: I ended up taking some continuing education classes I was interested in. I didn't have enough money to go into a Master's degree. I took a class on how to prepare your portfolio for the American market, a class in computer-assisted design, and a class in designing with recyclable materials. I met a Korean-American teacher who was the Design Director for a firm here in New York. I think he related to me. He saw that I was a good designer but had no idea about how to tackle the American market. I was a foreigner, so he guided me. I didn't have the money to live or study in New York City, it was just too expensive. When I went back to Argentina I started to freelance a lot, I had more energy and more focus after my New York visit. Instead of looking for a full time job I decided to concentrate on freelancing and I was able to do it successfully. I also did some freelance for American firms using the contacts I made in New York, which was great. I was making enough money to live but I certainly could not save or plan ahead too much. I also

had to take jobs that were not design related from time to time. The idea of coming back to New York was always on my mind.

ES: Let's move on to talk about your career and the objects you design and how you ended up doing streetscapes, and the type and breadth of streetscapes that you work on. Was your first job here?

IC: My first job was as an industrial designer for the 34th Street Partnership.

ES: How did you get connected to the 34th Street Partnership and Biederman?

IC: My wife got a job at the financial department of the United Nations in New York. Modern Dance did not work out so she finally finished her accounting degree and is now a CPA. We both moved here and I started looking for a job, after a while I saw an announcement for an interesting urban design position with the Partnership.

ES: What was the first design that you made for the 34th Street Partnership, you said, that got implemented?

IC: When I started, it was more for storefront design. They had this free service that would offer stores owners in the district to redesign their storefronts for free. And then they would pay for half of the improvements. Some of the stores got implemented because the company was paying for them. First the program was, "We'll give you the design for free, and you have to pay for it," but that didn't work. Then they decided to pay for design and implementation. That worked. A bunch of stores participated; it was nice to see our designs were getting out there.

ES: How is the design process at 34th Street Partnership and then at Bryant Park Corporation and the other BIDs that you work with, how is it different from what you expected the design profession to be?

IC: I guess the main difference was that these companies did not have an in-house design design department and were not a design consultancy, so I was put into a corporate culture as a designer but no one really knew how to interact with designers at the company. Right now, I'm at a point where I have five people who report to me, and I'm the VP of Design and I sit at the table with the other VPs and the CEO. When I started there was not a design culture already established. If you enter a design consultancy, you work with designers that are within a structure that you can learn and follow. If you work for a corporation that has an established in-house design department, there is also a structure. Here there was no such structure, they knew they

needed design but it was up to me to shape the in-house department. I had to make them understand, “Okay, you hire a designer or designers, but you need a design department with a structure in a way that can service your different needs and has a structure that is effective.” I couldn’t report to ten different people at the same time. It’s tough to accomplish something within a structure like that. People have a million different opinions, and if there is no obvious project manager or a senior partner that wants to get things done, it’s very difficult. We now have a process that works very well, a process that I created and implemented with the help of the CEO.

ES: What’s an example of a design that you made that you thought should have been an easy approval process that ended up potentially becoming problematic?

IC: The first streetscape projects I worked on. The in-house situation—I figured that part out. Then there was the issue of the city approvals. That was very different from school because in school they don’t teach you that part. No matter what kind of industrial designer you are, there are always regulations, patents, and specifications that need to be followed. You learn many of those on the job. A couple of the projects I worked on in the beginning were successful after four years of working on them. When I first started, I thought, okay, this is going to take me four months, six months tops. It ended up taking three or four years.

ES: What was that design?

IC: Well, we worked, and continue to work, on different street furniture designs for New York City. A concept for a twenty-first century phone kiosk is one of them.

ES: What is the design problem for the phone that you guys are tackling?

IC: The public phone industry in New York evolved in a very bad way. There was a bunch of phones on the sidewalk already, and then someone decided to allow advertising to go on them. Instead of designing a structure that could carry advertising and could service the public in a good way, they just decided to allow companies to attach ad panels to existing phones, which is a situation we still live with today. And then you had the cell phones, so less and less people were using public phones. Many of these structures became advertising kiosks without a dial tone, and that was not a service. It wasn’t something the pedestrian really needed and in many cases blocked narrow sidewalks. The phone companies had the permits to sell advertising, so it wasn’t a matter of saying “You can’t do this anymore” because they had the right to do it. They had the franchise to do it. How do you design a structure that carries advertising with the sizes they want but also provides a service to the pedestrian? And how do you do it in a way that is aesthetically

pleasing and complements the city? That was the challenge. How do you manage the expectations of the phone companies and the ad companies and the pedestrians, and then the Public Design Commission and the Department of Transportation and the Department of Information and Telecommunications—all these different entities that had different needs and cared about different things? As the designer, I told myself the pedestrian was the most important thing, although I wasn't telling the phone companies that. It's a telecommunication device on the sidewalk. It's there to service a function for pedestrians, right? If you don't have a phone on you, you should be able to make an emergency call. That's important. But how do you make it so that the phone companies use it and it's useful to them, too, and they can make money with it? If that's not the case, they're never going to implement the design. We are still trying to come up with a solution for this one.

ES: I know that research and testing and user interviews are central to your design process. Is that correct?

IC: Yes, it is.

ES: At what point did you begin to implement research or "market testing," so to speak, in the creation of your designs and the pitching of your designs to these various partners?

IC: I like observational research a lot. I also like talking to people, but I try to avoid the question of: "What do you think the New York phone kiosk or bench should be like?" because that's not very effective—I really think Steve Jobs was right, you can't ask people what they need and want because they don't know. They're going to give you an answer that is probably not as forward-looking as it could be. It's not that they don't know. It's that they can't maybe express it.

If there are many products that are already doing what your product is going to do, it's very easy to go out there and observe people using them, for example observe them using a bench, or a bike rack. And then you talk to them, but you find ways of asking them, you find ways of extracting useful information. When I was designing a bike rack, I organized a meeting with fifteen different bike messengers, and I got them in a room, and I didn't ask them, "What do you think the bike rack of the future should be like?" I asked them, "What's important to you? What are the features that bike racks have now that are good? Which ones are bad and why?" I saw pictures of bikes with three locks on them. Why three locks? Why do you always lock it here? Why, why, why? And then they start giving you the answers. Some of what they were doing were workarounds for inconsistencies that the existing bike rack designs had. They wanted to do something and they found a way to do it around this product. That is something that is very

important. We are all very, very adaptable when we use products. You start using something that has a flawed feature that is not comfortable to you, whatever it is, so you find a way around it. And then you forget that you had the problem to begin with. So then if I ask you, "Do you have any problems with your iPad bookstand?" and you've been using it for three years, you have found ways around all the problems and you may not tell me what the problems are because you don't have them anymore, but that doesn't mean you didn't have them at the beginning. So, I have to dig through your brain to get you to tell me what happened at the beginning when you started using that product or when you started using the cup-holder in your car. Maybe your coffee is not getting spilled anymore, but you had plenty of time to find a workaround. Yes, it doesn't spill because you know how to put it in now; and you know when to put it in the cup-holder to minimize the spillage. You start your car first, you get it going, you back out of the garage, only then you drop your cup in. So if I ask you, "Are you spilling your coffee?", the answer is going to be no. But! That's not the real answer. You've found a way around the problem.

That happens all the time if you are analyzing how anyone uses a product. When I was designing the CityBench, I talked to people about public seating. If you ask someone, "Is this bench uncomfortable?," you don't necessarily get the right answer. But if you observe people—I would stand twenty, thirty feet away from a public bench or a bench in a subway station—and observe what they are doing, you see things that people do that they don't even notice that they are doing. Someone sits down and puts a bag that blocks a seat. Ten people show up; they're not moving the bag. Well, it's okay, that person is tired, the bag is heavy, and the floor is dirty. I don't want to hold the bag; it's uncomfortable. I am blocking a seat. Next person that shows up doesn't sit next to that person. They leave a seat in between. You have a four-seat bench with two people sitting on it. Most users that show up after that choose not to take the other two seats, right? And you see it over and over. Hey, there are two empty seats and no one is taking them. You see that ten times and then you go up to them and say, "Do you mind if I talk to you? I noticed you wanted to sit down and you didn't. Why?" "I don't like that guy; I don't want to sit next to that guy. If I sit there I'll rub my elbow with that person or his bag is in my way or this guy is sitting like this, and he's blocking the seat that way." Okay. So then, you start asking more specific questions once you determine the problem. In the case of the bench, there was a need for social space in public seating that none of the benches in the market were addressing. When you ask people why they didn't take that seat, they said, "I don't want to be in physical contact with a stranger. I don't know who that guy is. I feel uncomfortable." Or, "I feel bad. That guy looks comfortable. If I sit next to him then he won't be comfortable anymore." Or, "He has a bag, I don't want him to have to move the bag." Or, as some people told me, "The seat is not wide enough for me. I can't fit. My butt doesn't fit in that bench." The reason was that many of these benches had these dividers, these

armrests. We put them there so that someone can't sleep on the bench and take more than one seat. It becomes this thing about solving a problem that happens, but not that often. You solve that problem and you create so many more.

ES: Was that a requirement for the city, that they had the dividers?

IC: The city was very careful. They understood that you can't allow someone to take more than one seat and do urban camping for a week on a bench. That's blocking the seats for other people. If someone wants to take an occasional nap for an hour or two—maybe the bench should allow for that to happen. So it's a delicate balance because if you're going to have your armrests and they are going to be big and the seats narrow to solve that problem, you're making it uncomfortable for everyone else. So why even do it? It doesn't make any sense. So that's why the bench has really wide seats. When you sit in a public space, you want to have a relaxed position. No one sits like a stiff mannequin with straight angles on your knees and elbows like you see in an ergonomic book. People in ergonomic books sit like that, but no one sits like that in real life.

ES: Is this from *The Human Machine*? Or *The Measure of Man*?

IC: *The Measure of Man*. So this book is very useful for other reasons. But no one sits like this. Many of the public benches that you see out there seem to assume that you're going to sit like this, in a passive position, and you're not going to move or do anything. Most people move and shift positions when seating in public benches.

ES: And the benches are empty.

IC: And they're empty, right. When people sit in public—public transportation is a bit different in that you're not there that long—they should be able to have a good time and be able to relax, watch people, sit at an angle, change positions, slouch a bit if they want, cross their legs, put their bag next to them on the seat. If you have someone that is your friend next to you, you may sit at an angle facing him or her. If you have two friends, you may do something different. Why not? That's what you do at home, right? That's where you're most comfortable, in your house. You design your own living room; you pick your furniture. Hopefully, you were able to afford the furniture you liked. Why not strive so that a person is as comfortable sitting in a public space as he is in his own sofa at home, right? It's kind of an impossible task, but why not strive for that, why not go for it? Why not? People should be comfortable. A public space is there to make you relax, to give you respite from all the urban noise. You're not going to relax if you're forced to seat

like a stiff dummy. You're not going to type on your laptop while seating in a public bench if that means your elbows are bothering your neighbor. So I do a lot of observation to get ideas for public spaces, I especially pay attention to what private enterprise is doing indoors or outdoors. You can learn a lot by looking at the hotel industry or the bar and lounge industry; these places need to get you in the door so that you spend money. It's a must for them to make you feel comfortable in a unique way so that you have an experience there that you can't get anywhere else. They don't just want to get you in the door, they want you to stay and have a good time, bring your friends, stay awhile. They want to hear "We had a really good time, a really nice conversation. We are coming back next weekend."

ES: It sounds like you're talking about the CityBench, which is one individual object, but you're also talking about bars and restaurants, which are full environments.

IC: But I'm also talking about everything. I'm talking about the amenities, all the amenities in the public space that make you feel at ease and comfortable. And it can be from the paving to the table to the plants you have next to you. Everything. It's the full environment. No product lives on its own. There are other things always around it. And when it comes to these environments—I was telling you about private enterprise—they do it because they have to. Public spaces are really not designed from that point of you. We strive to do that. We want people to stay in Bryant Park for as long as they want to, and we want them to feel as comfortable as they feel in their own living rooms. So every decision we make is, okay, this person is going to stay two hours in Bryant Park. Let's give him things to do. Let's have him move the chairs around. Let's make sure the grass is not wet. Let's make sure there are flowers here. Let's make sure there are different activities he can choose to do. Noisy, not noisy. Shady, sunny. Meeting arrangement. "I'm alone, don't bother me!" Carousel, children, reading room, petanque, ping pong—all these things. Bathrooms close by. You're not going to stay three hours in a place if you can't go to the bathroom. Very simple solution. Music—someone playing the piano so you can go listen. Good food. That's the design of the environment and it requires a lot of different disciplines to get there. It's not just architecture or industrial design. Many different minds need to come together to create that.

ES: What I find interesting about that is, even though you mention it's the full environment—the programming of the park— something like your trashcan is something that the design community has acclaimed. How do you take that full environmental picture and apply it to a single object like a trashcan, which most pedestrians wouldn't necessarily notice?

IC: Well, the Bryant Park trashcan was an interesting case because trashcans are—I think these are not my words—"the unsung heroes of public spaces." First, you need to make the park popular. Then, you need to manage that popularity. In Bryant Park 5,000 people at lunchtime create a lot of disposable items. Most of the trashcans that I saw in the market when I started the design process were made to be relegated to a corner, utilitarian, painted with a dark color, hidden. The rational is to let them blend in because they are tough to maintain and to keep their surroundings neat. A trashcan is not something you want to call attention to in case it doesn't smell good, there's garbage around it, or it's overflowing. So companies tend to paint them with a dark color and hide them away as much as possible. In the case of Bryant Park, they have a management structure and a sanitation crew that is outstanding. Trashcans are always clean and emptied timely, and the park is always spotless. I decided to use the design of the litter receptacles to communicate that to the public. The trashcan becomes a feature in the environment, much like a flower. The inspiration came from nature, and it also communicates that the act of trash collection and recycling has a direct impact on nature and the planet. It takes a lot of energy and effort to have a trashcan that is a big part of the identity of the company. The design is innovative, not in the way it's operated by the sanitation crew, but it's innovative from a communication and identity point of view, and it elevates the urban trashcan and the importance of its function. Without them, you can't really manage a park or an urban sidewalk. When it comes to materials, I always try to use materials that are recyclable. Also, if possible, I try that the content of the material we buy is recycled, that it comes from post-consumer or it comes from scraps that were recycled from factories. Because most of my work is street furniture and has to do with using metals like carbon steel, stainless steel and aluminum, the industry in the US is already doing a lot. For example, when you buy carbon steel plate, up to 65% of the content was already recycled. A huge percentage of that 65% was post-consumer material. The industry of collecting scraps of metal and selling them and recycling them is big, especially with carbon steel and stainless steel. I recently designed a trashcan and recycling system for the Cleveland Regional Transportation Authority, where the recycled content in the carbon steel was 90%.

ES: Was that something that your client cared about or was that individually determined?

IC: Both. The client requested a very high content of recycled materials for that project, and I was happy they did. Also, the fabricator and suppliers were ready to make it happen, no complaints. The complication is that you also need to think about the end of life problems, if any of these parts are painted. You need to make sure that processes exist to remove the paint before having to recycle the product again. Designing a product to have a long life span is important, it shouldn't have to be repaired, repainted or replaced too often. The availability of new materials for

someone designing street furniture is not great. There are very few materials that you can really trust to last outdoors for ten years with minimal maintenance and be affordable. There are plenty of materials out there that you can shape and form and use outdoors, but they have to be affordable and you have to be able to source them. So the choices are not that many. I use plastics sometimes when it pays and the production run is very high.

ES: But not wood?

IC: I don't use wood as much. For a product that has to last outdoors for ten years, you're pressed to really get the durability you need; and with hard woods, you know the market has been changing to "What is sustainable and what is not?" Everyone loved Ipe for a while and now people don't like Ipe anymore. Why go to the Amazon and tear down twenty trees to get this one Ipe tree? Wood has many advantages and disadvantages. If you have to make street furniture, hard woods can get pretty costly. And, if you're making many units, it's difficult to control the quality and consistency of the product over a large number of units. In the case of the trash cans for Bryant Park, most of the parts are aluminum castings. Aluminum is very easy to recycle and is easy to get a high recycled content in it, up to 65%.

ES: I noticed the feet of the trashcan. Anthropomorphic, also reminded me of Christopher Dresser designs. Was that an influence on this particular piece?

IC: Good observation. I love the work of Christopher Dresser but I don't think I was thinking about him when I designed this can, it may have been an unconscious influence. One of the challenges in this design was that it was tipping too easily, so we created these feet to increase the base diameter, without increasing its bulk. They're meant to look plant-like.

ES: In the final few minutes we have left, can we talk about the sketch that you pulled?

IC: The sketch was just on the table. I didn't pull it for the interview, but we can talk about it if you want. Well, this is a chair I'm designing that is meant to be in the same product line as the Citybench. A very important part of a successful public space is movable chairs—chairs that can be moved easily so that the user can choose where to sit. We use bistro chairs in Bryant Park. They're very light. I think they're a little over eight pounds. The patent of that chair goes back to France, 1878, and it's still being manufactured today. It's not very comfortable but it is lightweight, movable and it folds. When you move to the contemporary side of design, there is no equivalent to that bistro chair, to that movable chair for public spaces. Many people sell chairs and say they're movable, but when you look at the weight, they're not really. You see a chair is fifty

pounds, sixty-five pounds; an elderly person could not move that chair. My objective is to have a contemporary design for a movable chair that can be used in public spaces and also in your home if you want something that is easy to move and as light as possible. Not sure if I'll be able to get it at eight pounds, but I'll give it a try.

ES: Is that your target?

IC: Yeah, well, maybe ten pounds. So that's the challenge. Because you could manufacture this design and easily end up with a fifty-pound chair. That's the easy way out. I want something really movable for public spaces. That's what I'm starting to think about, what the right technologies are. There's a lot you can do these days with thin plate aluminum or steel manufacturing that you couldn't do before, and plastics. We'll see. This is interesting. It's going to take a lot of prototyping to get the right weight. The weight was not a priority for the CityBench because it is surface mounted to the sidewalk but it is one of the main priorities for the CityChair.

ES: My final question would be about the future problems of design. What do you see as things that are still going wrong in the design world outside of your immediate sphere, that will be the biggest challenges to tackle over, say, the next ten years?

IC: We talk all the time about the financial crisis and the economic crisis, but there's an urban crisis also. 50% of the world's population now lives in large urban areas like New York or Buenos Aires. By 2050, if I'm getting the numbers right, the estimate is that 75% of people or more will live in urban areas. And we now have all these devices that allow us to work wherever we want. It used to be that someone could work at home because they had a PC. Now most of us are walking around with light laptops, tablets, or high end cell phones that have lots of other functions embedded. We can work anywhere we want. Why be in the office? Why be stuck at home? Well, guess what, because public spaces are not that good. Why would you want to be in them? If all these people moving into cities are working with mobile computers and have the ability to work from anywhere, how should the city change to reflect that type of use? If you're a writer, you could be in a ferry going to an island, or sitting in a waterfront park while you work. It's going to change the dynamic of how people interact with cities and their spaces. The designs of our cities are not up to that task. Many cities are already having major problems. Imagine what would happen in fifty years if changes are not made. It's great to have parks and great public spaces, but what about the sidewalks? Those are public spaces, too. Why have equipment that belongs on a highway? In many US cities, not in New York, the people that decide what street furniture is used are highway or traffic engineers. Why would highway engineers be deciding that? They have no idea, no sense of pedestrian scale or design for people. Why would cars get so much space in

urban centers? Why not more space for bikes and pedestrians? There's a lot of talk about this right now, and it seems like a cliché, but it's very important that cities consider these problems very carefully, otherwise it will be very difficult to get from one place to the other and the quality of urban life will be very poor. Maybe the proportion of square footage assigned to cars and pedestrians should be flipped. The design challenge in that case is what the sidewalk is and what kind of equipment should it have. How is technology going to seep into these places? How is this public space going to amp your wearable/portable technology? Can you plug your cell phone into a bench and recharge it? Can you swap your battery? Can you show your video to a client in the middle of central park using a large screen or projection? That's where I hope the future is going, where you have the proper shade you need, the proper seating you need, to be comfortable in a city sidewalk at any time and to have technology available at the service of the pedestrian, not just streaming advertising to people. There are millions and millions of dollars that developers are investing on buildings in New York and lobbies. You walk out into the sidewalks and what do you see? Cast-in-place concrete with gum stains on it and a light-pole that illuminates the street for cars but not the sidewalk for pedestrians. Governments must tap the expertise of private enterprise to solve these problems because they are not equipped to do it on their own. A lot of different disciplines are needed. Alternative modes of transportation like biking are great but, what happens when you go from ten bikers per block to a hundred bikers per block? How are urban bike-racks going to evolve to address this? Why should all the parking spaces be for cars? Could bikes be also parked at the curb in dedicated spaces? Why push the bike parking to the sidewalk where pedestrians are walking? The challenge of design is to come together to address the fact that cities aren't working for people anymore, and it could get much worse if something is not done soon. Cities need to be livable, sustainable environments that respect people and nature.

ES: Thank you so much for meeting with me. This is the end of the interview.

IC: Thank you.

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