

Visions of the City

Architects Pavlina Ilieva and Kuo Pao Lian are bringing their unique and modern ideas to a Baltimore composed of buildings erected during the 18th and 19th centuries

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When Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the famed German American architect, brought his modern design to Baltimore in the early 1960s, it was met with mixed reviews. In one notorious incident, the local project architect who had helped van der Rohe erect a 23-story glass and aluminum office tower downtown was standing outside the building when a man approached.

“Are you responsible for this?” the man asked, before swinging his cane and barely missing the architect’s head.

Baltimore is a city of historic architecture, composed of buildings erected during its boom years in the 18th and 19th centuries. Excluding the structures lost to the Great Fire in 1904, this is still

the city we largely see today, one built of brick and defined by the march of rowhouses. People have been wielding the proverbial cane against architectural change here for decades; even van der Rohe had to concede to brick for the facade of his residential apartment building, Highfield House, after the neighbors insisted.

Which is why coming across a rowhouse on Dallas Street in the Fells Point neighborhood today is such a joyful surprise. The circa 1870s brick facade remains intact, but behind it the home explodes into a three-story rectilinear white form punctuated by a line of windows. From a distance, the back of this house looks like a sculpture set on a brick plinth.

Buildings like this one have been appearing more frequently in Baltimore, courtesy of an upstart architecture studio called PI.KL. The firm name (pronounced like the brined cucumber) comes from the initials of its principals, wife and husband Pavlina Ilieva and Kuo Pao Lian. Since its founding in 2010, PI.KL has been injecting contemporary design into old Baltimore structures. It transformed a 120-year-old auto-body building into a bustling commercial and retail space. It returned the abandoned Broadway Market, one of the oldest public markets dating to 1786, into a vibrant food hall again. It has been reimagining the possibilities of the classic rowhouse for clients like cinematographer Bradford Young, known for his work on films such as “Selma” and “Arrival.”

The firm is, at the same time, redefining where new architecture can exist by developing, designing and building its own projects in economically diverse areas of the city. When PI.KL’s Dallas Street house won a 2020 Excellence in Design Award from the Baltimore chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), the professional organization for architects, the jurors remarked how rare the house is for its contemporary approach as well as for being in a city neighborhood “where an architect is typically only marginally involved.”

Ilieva and Lian understand working at the margins. They are unique for their ability to infuse contemporary design in a city of passionate preservationists, but also for who they are within their profession. Ilieva came to the United States in 1999 from Bulgaria on a college scholarship; Lian is first-generation Taiwanese American. Only 11 percent of registered architects in this country identify as a racial or ethnic minority, and just 17 percent of architects are women. A mere 2 percent are Black.

If architecture is “frozen music,” as the 19th-century writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once called it, then our built environment has traditionally been composed by White men. Architecture is imbued with the ideas and intentions of those who create it, meaning a vast portion of Americans haven’t adequately participated as the designers of our buildings. Today, Ilieva and Lian are not only bringing a fresh perspective to Baltimore’s classic vernacular styles. They are also challenging the status quo and showing how identity differences enliven a city.



Baltimore's Broadway Market, revived by architects Pavlina Ilieva and Kuo Pao Lian. (photo by Evan Woodard)

I first met Ilieva and Lian in 2005, around the time they first moved to Baltimore. They had recently graduated from Texas Tech University's College of Architecture and were working for larger, well-established companies. Even then, they had big schemes. "We always knew that we were going to have our own firm," Ilieva says.

Architecture doesn't often encourage the aspirations of the young, however. It's a profession built on the idea of apprenticeship, where acolytes sit at the feet of the elders and grind out design drawings for a decade or so before ascending. Back then, the notion of the "starchitect" — where a studio was built around the lone genius of the man at the top — was only just beginning to wane. A new generation of aspiring architects was beginning to imagine the ways in which their work might be more democratic and better able to serve the greater good. Ilieva and Lian were firmly in this camp, and they were brimming with ideas.

"We were those young people trying to be progressive, trying to push," Lian says. "We were always proposing ideas and instigating, and I think we annoyed our senior colleagues enough that they just gave us what we wanted to make us happy so we'd get back to work."

The couple took over a professional development series known as the Young Designers Forum and began hosting lectures where new ideas about urban design could be explored. They entered

global architecture competitions in their spare time. And they took over a corner bar in Fells Point where a group of fellow designers met for drinks each week to plot. “Pavlina and I had a desire to create places where we could gather people and start a dialogue,” Lian says. Ilieva and Lian are both deeply curious people who grew up in environments that didn’t always support that kind of outgoing inquisitiveness. Ilieva was raised in Bulgaria near the coast of the Black Sea. “I grew up in public housing because back in the ’80s in socialist Bulgaria, nobody got a house,” Ilieva says. “We lived on the ninth floor of a 16-floor tower, and it wasn’t a hospitable place. That form of living, by design, was not really meant for people, but everyone did their best to make it feel like home.”

College in Bulgaria was free, but it was incredibly competitive. “I heard that in America, you could take this test called the SAT and then decide what you wanted to study,” Ilieva says. “That sounded pretty good to me.”

She prepped for and took the SAT, and earned a scholarship to Texas Tech in Lubbock for architecture. Before leaving, a friend asked if Ilieva knew of any famous architects. She admitted that she didn’t. “I was always more interested in the design than in the names of famous architects,” she says. “My friend wrote ‘Frank Lloyd Wright’ and ‘Le Corbusier’ on the back of a restaurant receipt, and that’s all I knew about architects when I arrived in America.”

Lian, meanwhile, was born in Texas to parents who had immigrated there from Taiwan in the early 1970s. It was an isolated upbringing. “My parents were very protective, so if we hung out with anybody, we hung out with other Asians,” he says. “We didn’t have a lot of money, so I read books. And I drew.” As a kid, Lian turned a bedroom closet into his first design-build project, taking a large cardboard box and making it into a playroom and artist studio behind his clothes.

Ilieva and Lian recognized a similar spirit in each other when they met at Texas Tech. “We’re very different as designers,” Ilieva says. “I tend to be a bit more analytical, and Kuo Pao is a bit more intuitive, perhaps, or more visual, but it’s the whole cliché of opposites complementing each other.”

In 2007, after working in Baltimore for a few years, they left to join a high-end contemporary residential architecture firm then based in San Diego, the Sebastian Mariscal Studio. There, they refined their design and fabrication skills working on the kinds of houses that make the covers of glossy magazines. “The level of quality and detail that we were doing out there, we needed to gain that experience,” Lian says. “The work was beautiful and we learned a lot about building. Baltimore was pulling us back, though. We really love it here. We love the grittiness, the texture, the culture.”

“We’ve always found Baltimore to be very accepting of us,” Ilieva says.

Returning to Baltimore, though, meant building a practice in a city with a rigorous design and historic preservation review process, one that hasn’t always welcomed different design styles.

“There’s an old guard that’s always been here, and they all know each other,” Lian says. “These were people who’d been around for 30 or 40 years.”

There’s a perspective that comes from being outside the dominant culture and looking in, and Ilieva and Lian have built relationships in the architecture and planning world by acknowledging their differences. “I am not cut from the same cloth as the old guard, and I am okay with that,” Lian says. “I respect that they’ve been here longer and that they know more about the processes in the city. Pavlina and I want to be as genuine as possible and build genuine relationships.”

Ilieva jokes that her no-nonsense approach hasn’t always been the norm in city design review meetings. “There were times when I was presenting a project and I said things and thought, ‘Uh-oh, I’m never going to get work in this town again,’ ” she says. “I’ll just come hard on somebody. But what’s really interesting is that we’ve learned that some people, not all of them, but some people appreciate trusting that you will tell them what you think. That you will be honest about what you think is best and not just what they want to hear.”

Ilieva’s levelheadedness earned her an invitation, in 2015, to join the city’s Urban Design and Architecture Review Panel. Ilieva and Lian “have a keen and critical eye,” says Kathleen Lane, who for years worked as the executive director of AIA Baltimore before joining AIA National. “They have a really strong sense of the public realm and how design can contribute to a sense of place.”



The back of this Dallas Street rowhouse — which retains its 1870s facade — looks like a white sculpture set on a brick plinth. (Photo by Steven Norris)



The three-story Light House has a clean, almost Scandinavian look. (Photo by Steven Norris)

Launching an architecture practice in Baltimore also has fiscal implications. “We knew we wouldn’t have a clientele that has hundreds of dollars per square foot to put into a house,” Lian says. “That doesn’t mean that they’re not deserving of exquisite detail. We needed to still be able to give clients a modern contemporary building that they deserve just as much as a wealthy person deserves.”

They began to figure that out on the first project that they developed themselves, the Dallas Street house. PI.KL is structured as a design-build firm, which means the architects have both the skill to visualize a space and the technical chops to realize it. “Luxury” is, arguably, the most overused marketing adjective in all of housing right now, but “‘luxury’ is not the most expensive thing that you can get on the market,” Ilieva says. “It is the most considered and the most put-together.”

At Dallas Street, for example, they used an off-the-shelf, fiber-cement material called Hardie siding for the exterior of the addition, but they ordered varying sizes that they then layered in a way to create a unique facade. The house sold quickly to a couple thrilled to find contemporary design in Baltimore. “To us, it really proved that there is a market for this kind of thing here,” Lian says.

The challenge with the rowhouses that dominate Baltimore and D.C. is that while there is a diversity of exterior styles and sizes, for the most part, you're limited by the confines of a long, narrow footprint. Ilieva and Lian still ask questions and love to find the creativity within the confines of the rowhouse box. "At the start of every project we think: How do we look at this in a different way? We want to understand how a project should be done in the best way possible," Lian says.

In another award-winning home, the remodel of a rowhouse for a client, a jury of local and national architects wrote that they were wowed by how the designers manipulated the interior space to create "a beautiful, comfortable, and contemporary interior" while maintaining the historic exterior.

In 2020, they designed and built a three-story house on the empty lot of a historic block in the Ridgely's Delight neighborhood, near Baltimore's sports stadiums downtown. They dubbed it the Light House, for the ways they were able to manipulate the design to bring in more natural light. The house has a clean, almost Scandinavian look, with polished concrete floors on the first level and warm wood elsewhere. The best architecture in a historic city is that which can speak to its time while staying in conversation with the past. Sometimes that conversation needs to be a shout and a building should startle us to our senses. Other times, as it is here, it's a subtle but significant departure from the neighboring houses, bringing a new story to an old block.



E. 1507, an award-winning rowhouse in the historic Douglass Place neighborhood. (Steven Norris)

The core of architecture is storytelling, right?” says Bradford Young, the cinematographer. “What I love about Kuo Pao and Pavlina is that they’re great listeners and they’re lovers of story. They really want to understand you and your story on every level.”

In 2017, Young and his wife were living in London with their children as he worked on the film “Solo: A Star Wars Story.” He’d just earned an Academy Award nomination for his work on “Arrival,” and he and his wife were thinking about where to settle once his work in London wrapped. They debated cities: Los Angeles. New York. Paris. Montreal.

That’s when a fellow artist and filmmaker, Elissa Blount Moorhead, suggested they come to Baltimore. Moorhead had moved to the city’s Reservoir Hill neighborhood and had enticed several other Black artists to move there as well, starting what has since become a vibrant community of creatives.

Young bought a 19th-century brownstone rowhouse not far from Moorhead. “My wife and I like the Scandinavian minimalist thing, but at the same time, we’re lovers of African and Black culture,” Young says. “We were interested in where we could put those elements into a house.” Young wanted an architect that “wasn’t just going to do what I see in every house in L.A.,” he says. “I was looking for an architect that was going to have vision, and that understood us.”

The designers balanced the couple’s need for live-work space and family space for their three children, while inflecting the interior with a contemporary design that brought in cultural references, both in the structure itself and in choices of color and art. “The house is so welcoming, it’s a place with so many elements that my wife and I look at every day and love,” Young says. “I think the real thing that’s important for me is this question of what it is to be a Black body living in a turn-of-the-century American piece of architecture,” he adds. “There’s a lot of historical implications and challenges to that, and I felt like Kuo Pao and Pavlina really understood.”

Next, Ilieva and Lian plan to bring their larger ideas of diverse creative collaboration and good design into a community space known as Library 19. The building, built in 1922, is the former home of Enoch Pratt Free Library. PI.KL won a bid to develop it last year. Library 19 will be the new home of the designers’ growing studio, which is up to nine employees. Their vision is that it will also house commercial and nonprofit businesses and entrepreneurs, and offer outdoor and indoor public spaces. They want it to be multigenerational, where people can come and work while their kids play (their 10-year-old daughter can often be found sketching in their office after school). They both taught architecture at Morgan State University, a historically Black research university in Baltimore, and want to continue to instigate dialogue among young designers about how they might help imagine and build the future of this postindustrial city. “We can’t move the needle just by us pushing and striving,” Ilieva says. “Others need to come on board, and our vision has always been about an open conversation about our common future.”

Lian says they are always thinking about “what we could do for communities. We want to see the Library occupied by a diverse mix of people who can use it to take advantage of being together, and to collaborate. We’ve always wanted to do that, ever since we first moved here. If

we want to be a better city and we want to grow, we have to act like we're a place that's always evolving. We have to try to challenge the way things have been done, and invite more people into the conversation.”