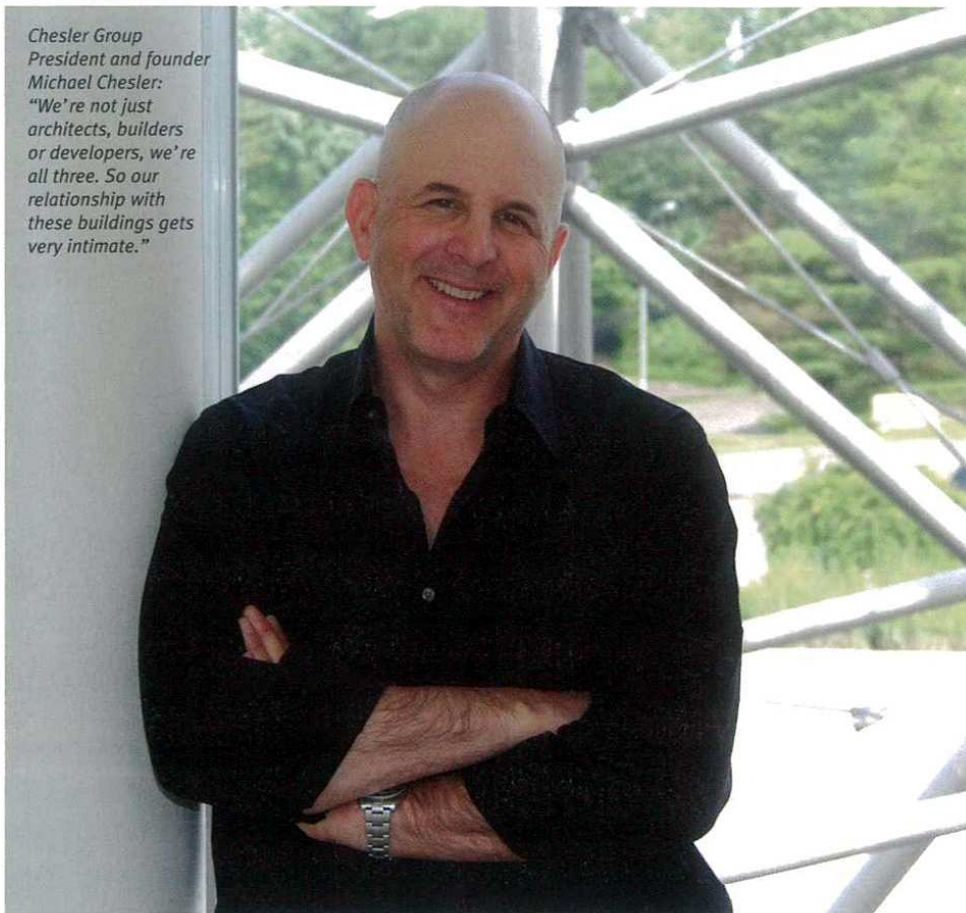


in touch with | michael chesler, president, chesler group



Chesler Group
President and founder
Michael Chesler:
"We're not just
architects, builders
or developers, we're
all three. So our
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these buildings gets
very intimate."

PHOTO BY THOMAS SKERNIVITZ

As the president and founder of the Chesler Group, Michael Chesler has gained recognition for his work in preserving historic commercial properties in Northeast Ohio. A graduate of Case Western Reserve University, he spent several years living in Japan as an analyst in the Tokyo office of *Time* magazine. He founded the Chesler Group in 1988 to help American companies and institutions export their intellectual properties and products to Asian markets. Over time the firm expanded into a variety of areas, most notably the preservation and redevelopment of historic properties and mobile software development.

Q How did you become interested in preserving historic commercial properties?

A It was more of an accident than a business decision. When I returned to Cleveland from working in Japan for IMG

and *Time* magazine, I started a firm to help American companies and institutions license their intellectual property throughout Asia, and because of the time difference, we worked mostly at night. I had a new English Setter puppy and was determined to keep her with me always, but nobody would rent me office space because

of the dog. So I bought an old historic building on Prospect. I had always been a natural builder of things, so during the extra time I had during the day, I decided to renovate it myself. When we completed the Gaensslen Mansion, we won an AIA award and praise from the architectural community. After that I was hooked.

Q In terms of restoring historical properties, what is noteworthy about Northeast Ohio?

A The Cleveland area and State of Ohio have a wealth of historic structures at very good prices.

Q Have you managed to stay busy during these tough economic and development times?

A There are not that many other people willing to do the buildings we do, so there is always demand for what we do. After some 20 historic building renovations, we've become niche specialists. We only restore buildings that already are or can be on the National Register of Historic Places. And I will only develop and build a building that is difficult and complex, and most importantly, I have to like the building.

Q What can you tell us about your current project — the renovation of the ASM World Headquarters in Russell Township?

A My love for that building started as a child. My father used to drive us to Burton on Sundays, and I always insisted on stopping to see the dome. I remember pleading with him to stop because I thought that spacemen had built the dome and maybe I would see some little green men. In high school the Dome was a hangout for me on dates ... I don't think I told the girls about the spacemen, but I loved looking up at the stars with them just the same. As a renovation project, the ASM world headquarters and geodesic dome is one of the most unique and challenging we've ever performed. It's the newest building in the state, and maybe the country, to be renovated using the Department of Interior standards for

historic buildings, and most of the rules used to set the standards were written for 19th century buildings. So in many ways we are writing new rules with this project as we go. The building is all glass, metal, and concrete, and our goal is to remain true to the initial intent of the architect in every respect. The trick is to remake everything and refit every element without it being noticeable to a layperson when they walk through. The renovated building will have a plaza, green roof systems, a unique radial layout, and it's all cast-in-place concrete.

Q What other projects are you most proud of and why?

A We are proud of all our projects and for different reasons. We're not just architects, builders or developers, we're all three. So our relationship with these buildings gets very intimate.

Q When is it right to renovate? And when is it right to tear down?

A Renovating is always a preferred way to go unless the building is so compromised it is dangerous. We Americans have a sad legacy of tearing down the old to make way for the new. This is short-sighted and immature. If we lose our sense of history,

we lose ourselves. I liken it to a kind of social Alzheimers. Without a rooted sense of time and place we become disoriented and cut off from each other and our surroundings.

Q How long did you live in Japan, and what role did your experiences there play in your founding of the Chesler Group?

A I lived in Japan full time for about three years then traveled back and forth spending about six months a year there for close to 20 years. In many respects, Japan is my second home. I worked for *Time* magazine and IMG in Japan and was therefore involved in hundreds of complex transactions with very senior business people. At *Time*, I was the only American in the office and the youngest. I developed life-long relationships with the Japanese staff who trained me like a Japanese business person. It was brutal and difficult. The Japanese do not have graduate business schools. They train on the job by rotating young people through all the departments and dropping them into the business blender on a daily basis. These experiences turned me into a hardened business veteran well before I turned 30.

Q Could you explain your role as the exclusive licensor for Harvard University's brand in Asia?

“AS A RENOVATION PROJECT, THE ASM WORLD HEADQUARTERS AND GEODESIC DOME IS ONE OF THE MOST UNIQUE AND CHALLENGING WE'VE EVER PERFORMED.”



A During my tenure at IMG I was in charge of helping Harvard University clean up its trademark licensing issues here in the United States. Through this relationship, the Harvard Provost at the time needed some help in Japan and Asia with infringement and was surprised to learn that my frequent trips away were to Asia ... it was a pure coincidence that they needed significant help in Japan and I happened to be a perfect fit. When I left IMG (I had always promised myself never to work for anyone after my 30th birthday), Harvard wanted to be my first client. That was 22 years ago, and we still perform all their licensing functions in Japan. Last year was our best year, with sales of close to \$40 million in sales. Then the earthquake and tsunami hit, and our Japanese partner lost 40 percent of its business versus a year ago. It's been a tragic setback for all the Japanese people.

Q Five of the nine most prominent officials at Chesler are female, including two vice presidents, two project managers, and general counsel. What have these women meant to the company?

A I am very fortunate to have an incredibly gifted and hardworking staff. Each of these executives performs the work of two-plus persons and is always game for the next adventure. My success is a direct result of their hard work and dedication. And because they happen to be women, they keep my ego in check.

Q Your mother owned the original Club Isabella. What are your memories of the jazz club?

A Pain, suffering, and hard work. My mother also owned That Place on Bellflower. When I asked her what college I should go to (I was the only one of my family to complete a secondary education), I was told "Whatever university you can afford." So I worked as a busboy, dishwasher, and sous chef ... anything to pay my tuition at CWRU. ■

For more information: cheslergroup.com

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