

Layers of light

A young Israeli designer was illuminated by time spent in the US

• By MEREDITH PRICE

As she stood in front of the National Gallery of Art, a spectacular building in Washington, partially designed by the innovative, Chinese-born American architect I.M. Pei, 13-year-old Sharon Neuman had an epiphany.

"I was inspired by a few buildings in the United States, mainly in New York and Washington, D.C., but when I saw I.M. Pei's design, I knew I wanted to be an architect," she explains.

Before spending a few years in the US with her family, Neuman says she enjoyed an idyllic childhood in Kiryat Ono and then Hod Hasharon. "When I grew up in Kiryat Ono it was all sprawling fields and parks. I never had to cross a street to get to school," she says. "But it was the time I spent in the United States that really opened my mind to the world of architecture."

Neuman's father, an engineer, was also a source of inspiration. "My dad has filed over 100 patents, but it's just for fun. He's never done anything with them."

After completing her bachelor's degree in physics, Neuman suffered through a brief stint in computer work before returning to her childhood dream of becoming an architect. "As soon as I could, I enrolled at the WIZO Institute to study architecture and industrial design and then finished my degree at the Technion in Haifa," she says.

As a student, Neuman worked for an architecture firm and then created her own business with a partner after graduation. Although her major focus remains private homes, she has also designed a few offices and apartments.

On the surface, houses might all seem to need similar rooms, but Neuman points out that every family needs distinct things to make its home into an ideal living space. For Neuman, the greatest challenge is finding several solutions and then choosing the best one for the family. "People live very differently and want different amounts of privacy," she says. "It's a creative process that most of my clients really enjoy."

To date, none of the couples Neuman has worked with have divorced and she jokes that part of her job description involves couples' therapy and teaching joint decision-making skills.

"I enjoy helping my clients with their color schemes and furniture, but I don't go as far as Frank Lloyd Wright and demand that they wear certain pajamas or bedtime slippers," she says. "However, I have been asked to help pick out sunglasses."

In addition to her work as an architect of both exterior and interior spaces, Neuman is also involved with product design. In 2000, she and her former partner

designed a bench for a street furniture competition that finished in the top 10, and in 2004, already working completely independently, her "Chaise Longuette" design was chosen to be part of the first Designed in Israel 2007 exhibition.

Using a layering technique that is both aesthetic and practical, the rocking chairs are designed for reading and relaxing. Layer upon layer of birch wood gives the children's chairs a smoother rocking movement than the traditional tube design.

"Each layer is actually composed of even more interior layers," says Neuman. "The layers are what give the chair a visual movement of waviness and make the motion smoother than traditional rocking chairs."

Fascinated by layers, Neuman also recently created a series of stationary wall and hanging lamps that are hand-constructed using thin sheets of Mylar (polyester film). "The Mylar actually lets the light through it and in between it, which creates an effect that changes from every angle," she

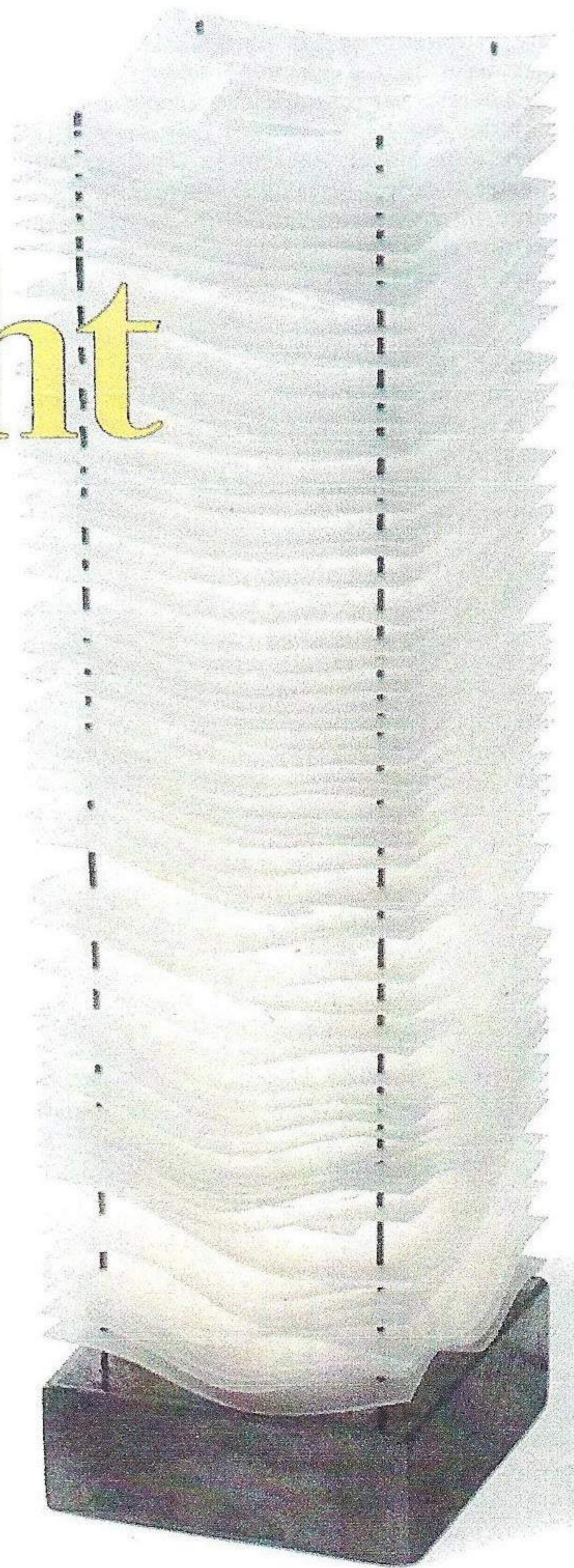
explains. "You can look inside it from the top and see something completely different than what you see from the side or low down."

Of course, the Mylar can stand the heat generated from the bulbs, and Neuman says that each person can put in the bulbs of their choice depending on how much light they want in a specific room.

Each lamp is hand-made, and Neuman sometimes hires former product design students to help her put them together in the studio. "The steel frames are made elsewhere, and the sheets of Mylar are cut from a mold, but to get the right effect, each lamp has to be hand-made and I can't have just anyone do it. I have to put the final touches on each one."

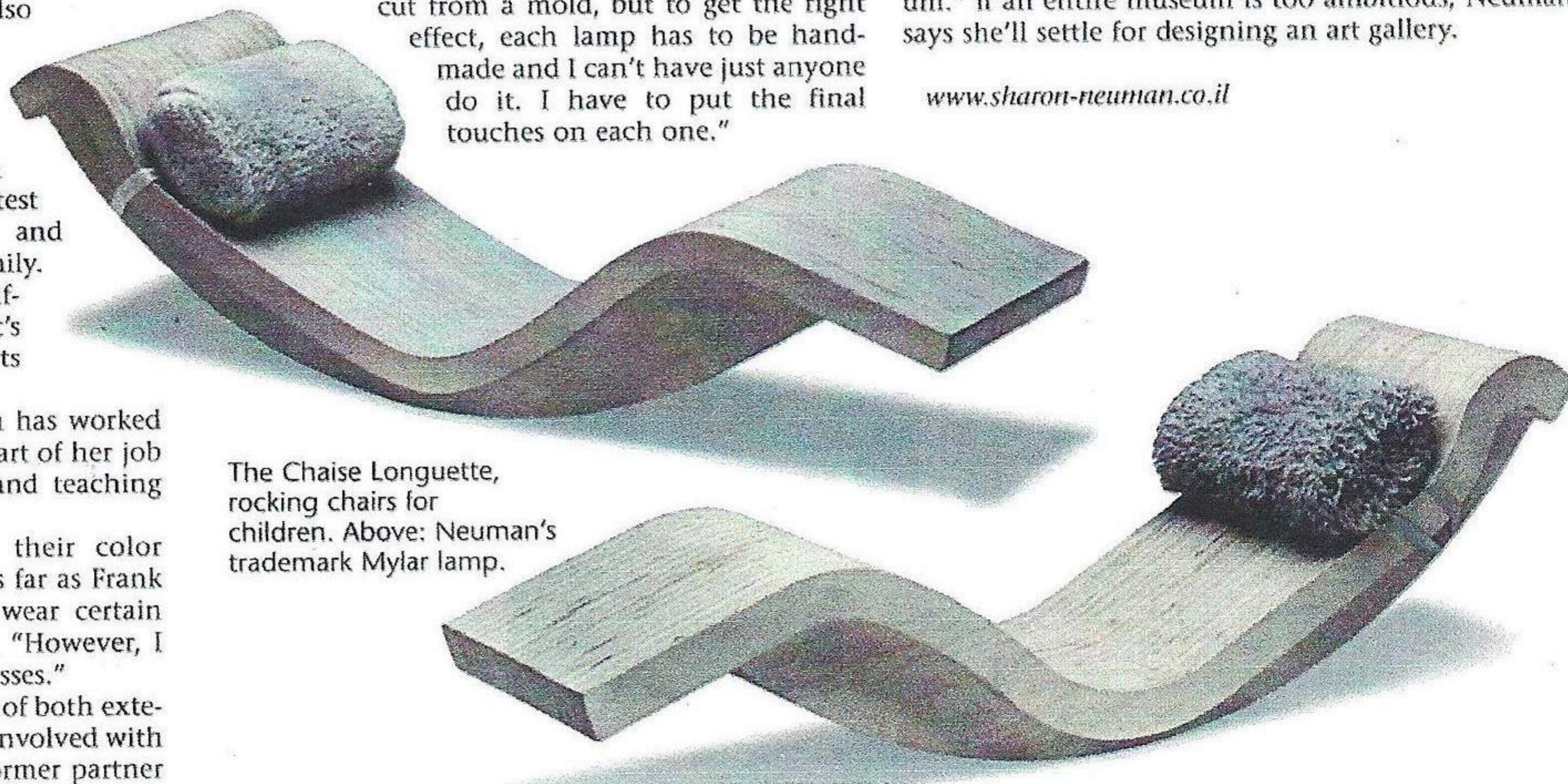


Sharon Neuman



Next year, Neuman is planning to expand her work with layers using recycled paper and cardboard. "I have an upcoming exhibition in the Periscope Gallery, but my dream is to one day design a museum." If an entire museum is too ambitious, Neuman says she'll settle for designing an art gallery.

www.sharon-neuman.co.il



The Chaise Longuette, rocking chairs for children. Above: Neuman's trademark Mylar lamp.