

America's Great Man of Steel

By [MARC MYERS](#)

Long Island City, N.Y.

At Mark di Suvero's studio in a former brickyard overlooking the East River here, the sculptor's eyes twinkled with mischief. "Give it a hard pull," he shouted as I struggled to tug a barbell hanging from a cable that traveled 18 feet up the wall and then across to "Magma," a recently completed steel work.



Ken Fallin

Little by little, the momentum of my strenuous two-handed yanking began to rock a giant steel double hoop straddling the spine of the 15-foot-high, multiton piece. Like many of Mr. di Suvero's towering steel-beam sculptures, "Magma" is both daunting and playful—as though it could come to life at any moment and gallop off. What does he think of his new piece? "I think, how are we going to get this out the door and onto a truck," he said, grinning.

Widely considered America's greatest living Constructivist sculptor for his structural use of steel I-beams, Mr. di Suvero, 77, was awarded the National Medal of Arts in March by President Barack Obama. And in May, 11 of his steel pieces were installed on the lawns of Governors Island in New York Harbor, an exhibit that runs through Sept. 25.

"I could see the Statue of Liberty while we were assembling the pieces," Mr. di Suvero said about the harbor's other large-scale sculpture. "I felt a sense of union with it. The idea of liberty is such an incredible thing. I think she's having a wonderful time observing my show."

Today, despite a horrific accident in 1960 that injured his back and forced him to use forearm crutches, Mr. di Suvero appears stronger than most people in their 20s. He continues to weld, cut and bend steel while operating a crane—all with the help of a few trusted assistants. For nearly 45 years, Mr. di Suvero has created more than 100 of these Tyrannosaurus-size sculptures—many of them painted carnival orange—as well as hundreds of desktop pieces.

Like the works of Russian Constructivists of the 1920s and American Abstract Expressionist painters of the 1950s, Mr. di Suvero's sculptures thrive on the collision of geometric forms. "I don't build small models or draw detailed plans first," he said. "I start with a vision, a dream of what I want to do, and see where it goes."

But unlike a painter, Mr. di Suvero must ensure that his mammoth creations won't tumble or crumple under their own weight. "I'm always conscious of balance and gravity's center point," he said. "Like a dancer or an acrobat—I'm feeling for that invisible point. For me, gravity is about space, the way water is to a surfer. Gravity isn't an adversary or an obstacle but an enabling force."

Mr. di Suvero is a steel whisperer. Since the early '60s, he has been madly in love with the brawny alloy, coaxing it into graceful forms. "Steel is an incredibly cooperative substance that's capable of handling space differently than marble or bronze," he said. "You can't get steel's cantilevering with stone."

Mr. di Suvero was born in Shanghai, China, in 1933, after his parents fled there from Fascist Italy. His father had been stationed in China years earlier as a naval officer. The di Suveros then left for the U.S. in early 1941, narrowly escaping China's Japanese occupiers.

Mr. di Suvero's family settled in San Francisco, and in the mid-'50s he studied philosophy and sculpture at the University of California at Santa Barbara and at Berkeley. After college, in 1957, Mr. di Suvero relocated to New York, moving to St. Mark's Place and then to a loft on Front Street near the Fulton Fish Market.

His sculptures, initially composed of plaster and wax, grew larger. "I was inspired by David Smith, Julio González and Alberto Giacometti," he said. "But living in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge, I was encouraged to think big."

Mr. di Suvero's first show was in 1959. "'Hand Pierced' was my earliest exhibited piece," he said. "But it was so hot in that basement gallery that the large wax hand I had originally created softened and slid down the pipe onto the bed of nails below," he said, laughing. Large wood pieces such as "Barrel" and "Hankchampion" followed that were made from beams and debris found on the sites of razed buildings.

In 1960, while working for a cabinetmaker, Mr. di Suvero delivered sheets of wood to a building. To fit the wood into the elevator, it had to be slipped up through a panel in the ceiling. His boss asked him to ride on top of the cab to ensure that the material was protected. "I had worked as a ship-fitter in San Francisco, so I was used to tight spaces," he said.

But the wood snapped when the elevator reached its floor. "I was thrown into the space between the elevator door and floor door, slicing and crushing me," he said. "I was trapped for an hour. I should have been dead."

After months in the hospital, Mr. di Suvero began to sculpt again from a wheelchair. "I was already in love with steel, but I couldn't afford I-beams," he said. "To work with steel that size, you need fireproof space and large, expensive equipment."

Mr. di Suvero's shift from wood to steel girders came a few years later as he began to train himself to walk with crutches. "In the mid-'60s I was able to trade welding time in Brooklyn for crane time," he said. "By going to a steel symposium in Toronto, I learned that I needed a welder, torch, grinders, hammers, chippers, a wire brush and a crane to hang steel so gravity could cold bend it. That was a real liberation for me. I bought my first crane in 1967."

A vocal opponent of the Vietnam War, Mr. di Suvero in 1966 designed "The Peace Tower," a 60-foot-tall, thin-steel sculpture in Los Angeles on which 400 antiwar paintings were suspended. It remained in place for three months.

In 1970, as the war continued, Mr. di Suvero moved to Europe in protest, sculpting at a shipyard in Chalon-sur-Saône, France. In 1975 he became the first living artist to have a one-man show in the Tuileries Garden in Paris. When the war ended that year, he returned to New York, and the Whitney Museum exhibited his steel-beam sculptures throughout the city.

Today, Mr. di Suvero's massive works stand in public spaces in more than 50 cities worldwide and are extensively exhibited outdoors at the Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, N.Y.

Where does Mr. di Suvero shop for his art supplies? "I buy my steel like artists buy white paper," he said. "I have steel suppliers in Pennsylvania. I'll give them specs for steel plates and I-beams, and they truck them up to my studio."

At the end of our conversation, I spotted a vibraphone near the door and asked him to play. "I will, but first you have to lie on that over there," he commanded, pointing to a mattress suspended waist-high by four cables.

As I lay on my back, swaying slightly, Mr. di Suvero ran mallets over the metal keys, playing in a free-jazz style that shares much in common with his art. When he finished, Mr. di Suvero turned and smiled: "And that's how steel sounds."

Mr. Myers writes on art, music and architecture.