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After 30 years, Yabu Pushelberg has become the quiet darling of the design world.

by Rima Suqi. Portrait by Paola + Murray



The indoor pool at the Four Seasons Hotel Kuwait at Burj Alshaya, completed last year by design firm Yabu Pushelberg. *Opposite:* George Yabu, left, and Glenn Pushelberg.



THEY'VE GOT 41 current projects in 15 countries, 80 products in various stages of design and development for 20 companies, and a staff of 125 spread between offices in Toronto and New York City, but George Yabu and Glenn Pushelberg, cofounders of the award-winning design firm Yabu Pushelberg, are not ones to revel in their success. "If we say we've made it, then we're done," says Pushelberg. "But we're not done. We're ambitious, and we think that we can be better."

Yabu Pushelberg has been a go-to in the world of luxury hospitality for decades. Yet despite its impressive roster of subtly glamorous interiors—from the Miami Beach Edition hotel's moody lobby to the Four Seasons Hotel in Kuwait City—the firm has always flown just under the radar. Maybe that's because of their Canadian modesty, or Pushelberg and Yabu are really just that nice, but the firm was often overshadowed in the era of rock-star designers

OPENING SPREAD, THIS PAGE, AND OPPOSITE: VIRGILE SIMON BERTRAND



The lobby of the Four Seasons Hotel Kuwait has a custom disco-ball-like creation from Lasvit. *Opposite, from top:* The foyer of the hotel's ballroom; the lobby staircase.



and big-ego starchitects. Now that era of gimmicky design is over, and the world has finally caught up to Yabu Pushelberg.

The duo, who met while interior design students at Ryerson University in Toronto and founded their firm more than 30 years ago, exude a refreshingly youthful energy. Perhaps it's because they surround themselves with young people whose viewpoints they thrive on. In the firm's New York offices they sit side by side—not in a glassed-in corner office but in the bull pen with everyone else.

That is, when they're in town. The couple, who have four homes (in Toronto,

Miami, New York City, and Amagansett, New York), took a collective 140 trips last year, visiting projects and clients, many of them repeats, all over the world. Las Alcobas Hotels owner Samuel Leizorek explains why he's worked with them on five different properties: "Their projects age incredibly well. They have a unique way of creating layers and depth that remains relevant." Their work is almost exclusively commercial, although Yabu admits that the firm reluctantly accepts maybe one or two residential commissions a year.

On deck for 2018: several projects

in London, including No. 1 Grosvenor Square, a residential development in the former Canadian consulate; the SLS Lux Brickell hotel in Miami and its Katsuya restaurant (opening this spring); Ian Schrager's latest Edition hotel, in Times Square; and a restaurant by the couple's longtime friend and client, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, that is scheduled to open in Manhattan's Seaport District this spring. "Some people prefer to go to a restaurant that feels like a circus," says the chef. "I go to a restaurant to relax, and their work is beautiful and very clean. I feel a clean design ages better than Rococo."

VIRGILE SIMON BERTRAND

Recent designs by Yabu Pushelberg include, from top, Cipher pendants for Lasvit (from \$4,500; lasvit.com), Nodi armchair for Tribù (\$1,925 through janusetcie.com), Planar, Tangent, and Stria silk-and-wool rugs for Warp & Weft (from \$6,250; warpandweft.com), Otto glassware collection for Lasvit (from \$160; lasvit.com), and Kawa III rug for Tai Ping (\$151 per square foot; houseoftai ping.com). *Opposite:* The firm's design for the Living Room restaurant at the Park Hyatt Hotel Bangkok.

The firm's unerring consistency is even more impressive when you note the couple's disparate backgrounds. Pushelberg is from a "happy middle-class family" that hails from German stock; his father grew up on a farm, and both parents worked in auto factories. Yabu is the youngest of six kids born to Japanese immigrant parents; his father was a master woodworker who helped build Tokyo's famed Meiji Shrine. After moving to Canada, he started a boatbuilding business but lost it when the family was sent to internment camps during World War II. The family finally settled in Toronto.

Successes aside, "nice" is a word you hear repeatedly about them from clients. "Some people are great architects, some are great decorators. I feel they're both," says Vongerichten. "You meet with them twice, and the third time they've got it."

The firm has added teams of industrial and textile designers, and, most recently, one of the partners became licensed to practice architecture. "We don't want to be architects, but we were missing opportunities," says Pushelberg. The addition of industrial designers has made the biggest impact so far. "Our furniture was okay, but we thought, 'Let's try hiring an industrial designer.' It was like, 'Holy crap, it's a whole different way of looking at things.'" Last year they created lights and glassware with Lasvit, as well as carpet collections for Tai Ping (Kiso) and Warp & Weft (Grid). While they will introduce pieces for eight brands this year, including furniture for Stellar Works, Henge, Tribù, and Avenue Road, they aren't always a shoo-in. Maxim Velčovský, Lasvit's creative director, who worked with them, was initially wary. "You need to be cautious with architects, to not let their high-flown ideas eclipse everything

else." Here Yabu Pushelberg's even-keeled approach paid off. Leon Jakimič, the founder of Lasvit, was pleased by the pair's designs, saying that they weren't "too general or kitschy."

And, despite being inducted into the Order of Canada for their achievements, they still have a few dream projects, like designing the residence of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau or planning a museum. Lofty goals aside, when pressed, Pushelberg concedes that "we have lots of self-satisfaction on many levels," yet quickly adds, "but there's no 'My God, we've made the Eiffel Tower! We're done!'" ☺



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