



FEATURE



Yen Ha and Michi Yanagishita of Front Studio Design Striking, Distinctive Spaces with Wit and Imagination

Since Front Studio's inception, partners Yen Ha and Michi Yanagishita have made it their business to bring a unique and artistic twist to the sometimes-linear profession of architecture. Distinguishing themselves through their exotic creativity, rigorous design methods, and distinctive sense of humor, Ha and Yanagishita are known for taking on a vast array of projects, ranging from the overhaul of a pedestrian overpass in Poland to the renovation of a Harlem townhouse. The New York City-based architecture and design practice is also one of the few solely Asian-women-owned firms in the country.

Ha and Yanagishita met as freshmen at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Ha, a native of Vietnam, went on to study at L'École d'Architecture in Paris, while Yanagishita traveled between Tokyo and New York. Before they formalized their partnership at Front Studio, the women expressed their creative endeavors in nontraditional ways, such as faxing each other daily random portraits of fictional people and catering photo shoots and art gallery openings. In short, they did what they could to be immersed in creative environments.

Together, Ha and Yanagishita are fluent in French, Japanese, and Vietnamese — to the delight of their international clients. Their worldly experiences allow both women to draw inspiration from their surroundings, and the duo have an intrinsic talent for innovation and the merging of art with architecture — crucial to the unique niche in which they have placed themselves.

Founded in 2001, Front Studio possesses a highly diversified client roster that includes the Badge Building Condominium in Long Island City, French Embassy diplomatic residences in New York, the Fischer-Harling House, the AXA Art Insurance Corporation office, Village Kids Nursery, and the Outdoor Gallery of the City of Gdansk.

Front Studio has also been involved in various architecture and design competitions around the world, most notably as a finalist in the Farmadelphia "Urban Voids: Grounds

for Change" competition in Philadelphia in February 2006. Front Studio also placed second in the first international competition of the Outdoor Gallery in the City of Gdansk in July 2005 for its "Invisible Gate." The project connects an underdeveloped area of town to the main city center with a mirror-polished metal that creates an illusory effect, reflecting views of the surrounding town. Construction of the "Invisible Gate" is slated to begin in early 2008.



Front Studio's 2005 renovation of a one-bedroom downtown apartment focused on maximizing storage space for a stylish older couple who had amassed a lifetime of books, vinyl records, designer shoes, and suits. The women addressed the challenging project with creative methods such as a series of integrated bamboo cabinets that perfectly accommodated storage needs while establishing a common design language for the space.

"Our goal is not necessarily to change an entire space," says Yanagishita. "When we enter a new environment, we immediately sense which aspects of the space we want to enhance and what kind of feel we ultimately think defines the project."

Adding to the list of recent projects are regionally based design endeavors such as the sales center for Urban Green, a residential development in the heart of Williamsburg. An oversized, photo-realistic wall rendering next to the reception area brings the condominium's central courtyard to life. A strategically placed window opening in the façade provides an appealing glimpse of the interiors for the foot traffic outside the sales center.

"We enjoy taking on projects where we can take risks with the space," says Ha. "Anyone can take an empty space and mimic the reigning style, but we are looking to capture the essence of the space, using our minds and imaginations to turn the space into something truly unique for the client."

At the Badge Building, a 44-unit residential condominium in Long Island City, Front Studio recently designed the lobby and all the interiors of the building, including the kitchens and baths. A steel entry portal gives way to a curved mosaic-tiled wall colored marine blue and accented with yellow ribbons. Front Studio left the mushroom-shaped lobby columns white to enhance the contrast and drama in the space.

"We indulge in the lighter side of our personalities in our work," says Ha. "We don't design spaces that are slick or cold. We want to bring out what can be exceptionally appealing about a space."



FEATURE

Front Studio's whimsical nature can be seen in everything it does: since last February, Ha and Yanagishita, who rarely eat at the same place twice, have been posting where they eat lunch every day at lunchstudio.blogspot.com. They also recently commissioned a wallpaper to adorn their office walls. Karen Hsu, a partner and a graphic designer at the women-owned design firm Omnivore, created the witty wallpaper to graphically represent the presence of ladies working in a field traditionally dominated by men.

Ha describes the wallpaper as follows: "Hsu played with scale and density to create a double reading in the pattern. From afar it resembles traditional floral wallpaper, but up close there are hard hats, wigs, skyscrapers, flowers with pencils for stamens. Hsu did not lose sight of our femininity."

Sometimes the work gets to be as amusing as their personalities: in upstate New York, they designed a rusted steel cube situated next to a traditional country house. The challenge of integrating the existing structure with a modern addition was addressed by recladding the existing house in bright blue aluminum siding while using a natural rusted siding for the addition. Extensive site analysis oriented the new structure so that the interior captures sunlight as it crosses the property and takes advantage of the client's favorite views of the surrounding landscape.

Most recently, the two completed the renovation of a Harlem townhouse — three separate units which the owner wished to reconfigure in order to reallocate space for a larger owner's apartment while maintaining two generous-sized rental units. The work went beyond the normal duties of design

and architecture, as it often does with this pair. The client, a single Japanese woman purchasing her first townhouse in New York City, relied heavily on the architects to translate the entire construction process.

They call themselves architects because architecture is a profession recognizable to most people, but Yen Ha and Michi Yanagishita are far more: designers, artists, visionaries, builders, and businesswomen. With a distinctive sense of humor and keen attention to detail, these women are able to take any space and turn it into something that reflects the client but remains loyal to their niche: architecture that portrays effortlessness, fun, drama, and, most importantly, their own particular brand of style.

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