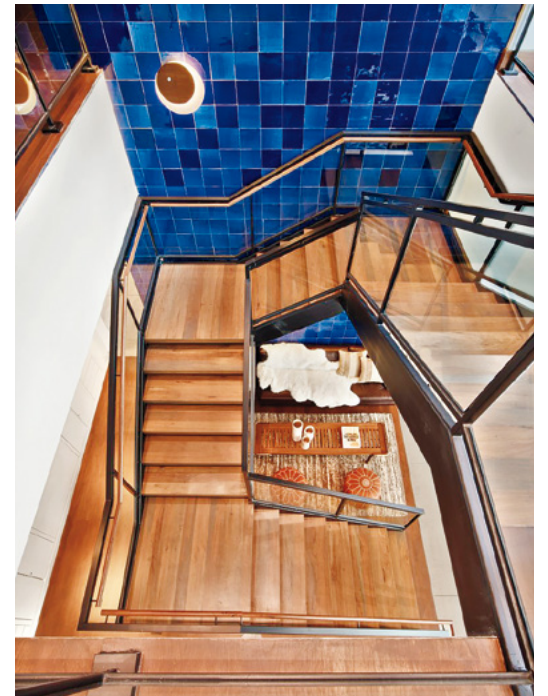




Four Heads Are Better Than One

At the design firm AvroKO, architecture, interior design, branding, and more happen under one roof



The jokes start as soon as the four founding principals of AvroKO begin posing for *Rhapsody's* photo shoot at Genuine Roadside, one of their many eateries in New York City. Huddled in front of the camera, Kristina O'Neal nudges Greg Bradshaw.

"Not so close, Greg."
"Greg is making me very uncomfortable," Adam Farmerie chimes in.

"Don't touch me there, Greg," William Harris says.

It's hard to make out the dialogue amid the laughter. Bradshaw responds with an

inaudible retort, and they all laugh harder.

They may mock fight, but the partners' design styles harmonize beautifully. Their collective innovation adds up to an award-winning creative agency that has the hospitality world clamoring for its services. The self-described "design and concept firm" runs the gamut of aesthetic approaches, and its success can be attributed to the seamless melding of the quartet's individual perspectives into spaces that evoke *joie de vivre*, a loosening of the tie in the form of a room. Take Duck

Clockwise from bottom left: Union Station in Denver, Momotaro in Chicago, and Genuine Roadside in New York City

Duck Goat, *Top Chef* winner Stephanie Izard's Chinese-American restaurant in Chicago, where the imaginative design evokes dreamlike vision of Chinatown with bristly patterned wallpaper, fringed lamps, and jade figurines. Then there's Union Station in Denver, a train station dating to the 1800s that the team transformed in 2014 into an eclectic grouping of restaurants, shops, lounges, and a hotel. Under the soaring ceilings, the "city's living room" comes to life through train-bench seating, Pullman car-esque drinking booths, and vintage suitcases with accents like metal buckles and caning that nod to a more genteel era of travel.

"We try to glue together projects in a different way than just aesthetics," says O'Neal, 43. "We ask what design would be in service of that specific project." Every year, the four have a partner summit at which they hash out their ideologies. Last year, they narrowed those down to three guiding principles: What's delightful in a space, what's meaningful, and how can you make a project revolutionary? O'Neal sums it up as, "What

are we doing that nobody else is doing?"

The group's latest enterprise is the just-debuted China Live, and it's predictably full of surprises. The 30,000-square-foot Eastern-influenced marketplace and collection of eateries in San Francisco's Chinatown—the press has dubbed it "a Chinese Eatery"—is designed to be an interactive experience in which vendors and demo stations focus on a specialty ingredient or cooking technique. The team took a two-week research trip to China to incorporate contemporary Chinese aesthetics, which range from communal wooden tables surrounded by signage borrowed from traditional wood blocking to cobalt-blue bricks found in modern-day Shanghai. The site's suggestively named bar, Madame's Parlour, is reached through a narrow hallway inspired by tenement vestibules and plays with the ideas of authenticity and kitsch through chinoiserie patterns, mirrors lit with neon bulbs, and a vintage mantelpiece with carved dragons. The tasting-menu-only restaurant Eight Tables brims with nostalgia culled from a fictional

From left: Duck Duck Goat in Chicago; the Arlo Hudson Square in New York

Chinese-American family living in mid-century Chinatown. A period turntable, family portraits, Chinese art, and painted screens lend credence—and a helping of romance—to the illusion.

But each partner brings more than just a unique vision to the collective; each also offers a distinct area of expertise. AvroKO is one of the few design agencies that combines interior, furniture, lighting, and graphic design, as well as architecture and branding strategy, under one umbrella. This allows AvroKO to offer its clients a comprehensive experience, from blueprints to branding; currently, the company has multiple ongoing projects in 14 countries.

The four founders, all college friends, formed AvroKO in the early aughts, after Bradshaw and

Farmerie, who ran an architecture firm, and O'Neal and Harris, who headed a branding and graphic design studio, combined their businesses. Today, AvroKO has 120 staff members in offices in New York, San Francisco, Bangkok, and London. There's a division that conceptualizes new hotel brands, one that designs custom lighting and furniture, and another that handles client strategy and development.

Although "there are surprisingly few conflicts," according to Harris, 43, when they do arise, the group discusses the problems. Once a decision is reached, all tensions dissipate. They attribute this to their 25 years of friendship. "The youngest of us was 17 when we first met, so it's been a long journey," says Farmerie, 44. "Whoever wins, wins, and that's the end of it. Then we just go get a drink."

Luckily, that cocktail can be enjoyed at one of the handful of bars and restaurants the partners own and operate under the AvroKO Hospitality Group, including Public and Saxon + Parole in New York (the latter also has an outpost in Moscow). Over the years, they've added



Galdones Photography (Momotaro); Anthony Tahlier (Duck Duck Goat)

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a roster of celebrated chefs to their kitchens and expanded to the Genuine line, a group of fast-fine eateries influenced by California roadside diners.

Farmerie says that Genuine Roadside, on Manhattan’s far West Side, where we meet for the interview, is a good example of the firm’s intention to create spaces that are both delightful and meaningful. “It’s sort of a modern reinterpretation of the basements in all of our ’70s split-level suburban homes,” he says. “It’s a retelling of our youths in this weird, re-idealized way: the extensive paneling, the quasi sun-kissed photos on the walls, the tape cassettes.”

Mark Eberwein, general manager of the newly opened W Las Vegas, praises AvroKO’s ability to incorporate the hotel brand’s ethos into its vision. “So often, hotel design can be stale or cookie-cutter,” Eberwein says. “But AvroKO created an amazing environment to kick off a Vegas evening.” The team drew its inspiration for the hotel from the Nevada desert and gambling culture. In Living Room, the hotel’s bar, wood and stone panels inspired by roulette tables add intensity to the earth-toned furnishings; host stands are modeled on chip rails and cashier stations; and framed custom screens made with thousands of regulation casino dice create dividers throughout the room. AvroKO’s attention to minute detail extends to a noir photo



shoot with models dressed as characters from a deck of cards. One of the firm’s employees took it upon himself to art direct the scene even though it “was not part of the contract,” Bradshaw, 46, says with faux chagrin.

Perhaps that’s why AvroKO’s work feels effervescent—it’s born out of eagerness. They all cite Public, their first restaurant, as one of their favorite designs to date. The Michelin-starred and James Beard Award-winning eatery features a utilitarian chic aesthetic that evokes public institutions like

AvroKO founders Kristina O’Neal, Greg Bradshaw, William Harris, and Adam Farmerie

libraries and schools via subway tiles and old library card catalogs. Oil lamps hover over faded leather banquettes. The partners designed and built the space from scratch.

“We set up a woodshop on one side, a metal shop on the other, and we were pouring concrete in the corner,” Farmerie says. “It was a real labor of love. I look at that space and even now, 14 years on, I say, ‘This was the best.’ And it’s not just because we made it and we built it, but because it still holds up, and it still feels great.”