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It Takes Two

Interior-design duo Yabu Pushelberg brings its collaborative magic to the new Four Seasons in Lower Manhattan





Across from the 19th-century St. Peter's Church in New York's Tribeca neighborhood towers a brand-new 82-story limestone monolith designed by Robert A.M. Stern that's home to the second Four Seasons hotel in New York City. The building looks traditional from the outside, as if it could have been there for decades, but inside, the design features modishly off-kilter elements, like a majestic double-floor staircase with an undulating filigreed metal balustrade. It's just the type of distinct, unexpected touch that the hotel world has come to expect from Glenn Pushelberg and George Yabu, the interior designers behind dozens of the hospitality industry's most iconic landmarks, including The London Edition, St. Regis Mexico, and Four Seasons Toronto.

One July afternoon, two months before the Four Seasons Hotel New York Downtown's September opening, Yabu and Pushelberg stand before that staircase, studying its overall effect; they're seeing the hotel after a weeks-long absence, during which they have been tending to nearly 30 ongoing projects in 16 countries and counting. "Edit, edit, edit," says Yabu, taking a



sweeping glance. "We want to crack away at a singular, strong message." Pushelberg runs a finger across a marble column and echoes the sentiment: "We always edit each other. We debate." They meander through the lobby, which is punctuated by artist Sophie Mallebranche's soaring screens, made from strands of woven stainless steel soaked in enameled copper, and enter the unfinished space that will house the latest outpost of Wolfgang Puck's steakhouse, Cut. Nimble picking through the spools of wiring and loose floorboards, hard hats in hand, they trade notes in low tones and exchange imperceptible nods, their bodies appearing to be hinged at the hips in a "V."

Clockwise from top left: The London Edition, the Four Seasons Hotel New York Downtown, the Four Seasons Kuwait, and Waldorf Astoria Beijing

The sense of comfort and the almost telepathic grasp each member of the duo has of the other's opinion is to be expected after a 36-year partnership, both in business and in love. They're celebrated for imbuing their aesthetic with a sense of place without resorting to pastiche. "I think of their look as thoughtful luxury," says Peter Humig, general manager of the Four Seasons Hotel New York Downtown. "They captured the unique character of Lower Manhattan, where history is merging with a dynamic new era." Their subtle salutes to the area's Art Deco past, seen in the Tetris-like lines in wall panels and carpeting, attest to that interpretation.



“We’re modernists, but we’re not minimalists at all,” Pushelberg says.

“It’s multilayered,” adds Yabu. “We can be respectful of the past and learn its DNA but give it a twist and a point of view that makes it look fresh again.” Case in point: Their jewel box–like Waldorf Astoria Beijing features enough indigenous touches—embroidered silk-paneled walls and black lacquered door frames—to appease a Ming Dynasty emperor’s vanity, but they’re interspersed within an updated, gilt-free palette of teal and chocolate browns that’s set against contemporary Chinese art to gratify 21st-century guests.

Their creative philosophy clearly works. As the principal partners in their eponymous design firm, Yabu and Pushelberg, both 63, helm offices in Toronto and New York and oversee a staff of 125. The Four Seasons Kuwait, Viceroy Dubai, and Las Alcobas in Napa Valley, all designed by the firm, are slated to open over the next year, and a number of tabletop collections will be unveiled next April at Salone del Mobile Milano. This past spring, they collaborated on a furniture collection with Linteloo, and lighting

and carpet collections are in the works. They’re creating the interiors for the Ritz-Carlton in New York’s NoMad neighborhood and designing an Equinox-branded hotel, both of which are set to debut in 2018.

It’s all a long way from their beginnings as eager design students at Toronto’s Ryerson University, where they met in 1972. “I thought he was a small-town nerd,” Yabu says of his first impression of Pushelberg. “His winter coat came to here,” he adds with a laugh, pointing to the middle of his forearm.

Their relationship didn’t blossom until a few years after graduation, when they decided to share an office to save money. They quickly realized they worked well together. “We did our drawings by pencil; I would start on one half and our lines would meet,” Yabu says. “We couldn’t tell when one of us had stopped drawing.” They officially launched their company in 1980 and became romantically involved around the same time. Initially, they concentrated on private residences, fine-dining restaurants like Dalloyau in Paris, and boutiques for brands including Tiffany & Co. and Carolina

George Yabu and Glenn Pushelberg take in the views from the Four Seasons New York Downtown

**“We can be respectful of the past and learn its DNA but give it a twist and a point of view that makes it look fresh again.”
—George Yabu**

Herrera, as well as Hong Kong’s famed department store Lane Crawford. Bergdorf Goodman’s celebrated beauty floor hasn’t changed since they finished it in 1999.

Designing hotels, though, was always the goal. “It’s an interesting challenge,” Pushelberg says. “You get to create restaurants and bars, personal spaces like guest rooms, and indulgent areas like spas. We had a desire to do this, but no one would let us.” Their wish was granted in 1998 by Isadore Sharpe, the founder of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, who hired Yabu and Pushelberg to create a more contemporary look for its property in Tokyo. After that project, more and more hoteliers came knocking.

The designers see their romantic relationship as an asset to their work. “It forces you to communicate better, because you have to learn how to communicate at work and at home,” Pushelberg says. “You build a much tighter and stronger relationship.”

“I see relationships not so much as compromises but as checks and balances,” Yabu says, turning to smile at Pushelberg. “Sometimes you need a little nudge, right? Like, ‘Listen: You’re full of s***.’”

“Jeez,” Pushelberg says with a chuckle. “True.”

“It’s funny—couples come to us almost like we’re the Holy Grail,” Yabu continues. “How do you keep it together?” Because everyday we’re laughing.”

Levity is just one of the secrets to their longevity and their ever-expanding business. “For us, life is about growing and satisfying our curiosities and finding people that have expertise that we don’t have,” Pushelberg says. “We know what we don’t know.”

“Challenges are inspiring in themselves, because you look and, being a little afraid, think, ‘Can I do it? Can I raise the bar?’” Yabu says. “That’s the stimulation that drives us: We want to surprise and delight.”