

Andrea DeRosa and Ashley Manhan

Cofounders
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How did you come to start your own firm?

Ashley Manhan: We met at a design firm in L.A. Both of us were just starting our careers and became fast friends while working late nights and long hours. We started the company in the fall of 2009. The economy and industry had taken a downturn, and I knew whoever was as crazy as me to start a business at that time had to be a good match.

Andrea DeRosa: I immediately recognized and valued Ashley's passion for design, collaborative nature, and willingness to do whatever it took to get it done and to get it done right. While we discussed the idea of starting our own firm together, we both recognized the need to expand our knowledge of the industry and work for other firms prior to building our own business plan.

Earliest memories of working together?

AM: Our first office was far from glamorous. We shared a bathroom with our eccentric neighbors who had been there for 30-plus years. We kept a sign on the communal door that read 'Enter at your own risk,' which was completely mortifying when clients or vendors came for meetings.

Tell us about your design process.

AM: A key element for us is trust. We both sincerely value and trust each other's opinions and never go at decisions with an ego. It makes collaborating together the most fun part of our job.

AD: Ash and I are always on the same page in almost an uncanny way. Whenever we're entertaining a new scope, we begin brainstorming independently, and when we come together to start conceptualizing, we often bring similar ideas and even literally the same inspiration.



A rendering of the soon-to-open Ramble Hotel in Denver boasts a luxurious lobby accented with industrial elements



What are each other's strengths and weaknesses?

AM: One strength we both share is patience. It's very rare that one of us loses our cool, and we both rely on that to create a balance.

AD: Undoubtedly, our weakness lies in saying no. Almost any project that comes our way gets deep consideration, as they almost always have merit in some way. It's only in the last couple of years that we've forced ourselves to pass on certain scopes that aren't aligned with our core business model.

A favorite project in your portfolio?

AM: Our work at MGM Springfield in Massachusetts, opening later this year, showcases our broad design sensibility.

AD: We have a [large-scale project] with Station Casinos opening this year, and while we can't say much, when they shared the branding ethos for the property with us, we knew it was the project we'd been waiting years for. The fit couldn't have been more perfect.

How do you overcome challenging projects?

AM: We recently installed the SLS Baha Mar. It's a project that's been on many peoples' radars for years. The project has gone through multiple evolutions before ever opening, so it was a challenge for us to work with what was existing and make sure the property felt fresh and current. It turned out to be one of our favorites. The public space is warm and inviting and very reminiscent of your dream living room.

What's on the boards?

AM: Last year, we started working on a property renovation with Station Casinos in Las Vegas. This was an exciting and breakthrough project for the office not only because of the property's recognition, but because it gave us the chance to help re-envision a new identity for the hotel. It's been exciting to create a design that speaks to the client, and also is a real representation of who we are as an office and the design we're capable of. It pushed the limits, and those are always groundbreaking accomplishments for any designer.

Biggest obstacle to owning your own firm?

AD: You're really never off the clock. Every once in a while, you have to let go and regroup. Additionally, we've experienced a lot of growth over the past two years, and our obligation to our team's livelihood grows. Everything becomes about the bigger picture.

Lessons learned from working together?

AM: Believing in each other and giving the other person the benefit of the doubt.

AD: You win some and you lose some.

How has your firm changed over the years?

AM: Your designs evolve as you grow and experience life, but evolving as a manager takes so many different strengths. Patience, listening, communication skills, and selflessness: Those are all traits we've developed over the past nine years.

What's one thing you know now that you wish you knew in the beginning?

AM: You're never prepared for the disappointment of when you don't get the project. Carving out a true home in this industry takes time. It's definitely not something that happens overnight.

AD: How long it can take to actually secure a scope of work. From the first mention of an RFP [request for proposal] to being awarded the bid often takes months, in some cases, years.

Why is two better than one?

AM: I could never do this all alone, nor would I want to. The amount we get done together in a day, or what we've done in nine years for that matter, is pretty amazing. When I get burnt out or reach the end of my rope, Andrea picks me back up. Her support is invaluable to me.

AD: We're constantly keeping each other in check, bouncing ideas off each other, and strategizing. Ultimately, it's created a similar collaborative culture within our office, which we couldn't value more.



A rendering of the rooftop Skybar at the SLS Baha Mar housed under a pavilion



The refreshing lobby in the SLS Baha Mar, dressed in bleached walnut and white oak wood