

TIME

The Boss: We Design Beautiful Interiors for the World's Coolest Hotels



Avenue Interior Design founders, Ashley Manhan and Andrea De Rosa. Courtesy of Avenue Interiors Design / Brent Dundore Photography

*In **The Boss**, women share how they became successful and the lessons they learned along the way.*

In 2009, the **economy** and hospitality interior design world had taken a downturn and knew whoever was as crazy as me to start a business in that industry at that time had to be a good match. My friendship with Andrea was well established before launching our business. Although we grew up on opposite sides of the country, we both were raised in homes that **celebrated creativity**.

We met in our early 20s during some of our first working experiences in the interior design industry. The opportunities seemed endless. Both Andrea and I quickly became immersed in the hospitality industry while working at some of the country's top design firms. This gave us exposure to high profile clients including Kimpton Hotels, Starwood Hotels, Hilton and more. Our **career paths** eventually went in their own directions. I took a job with hospitality pioneer SBE and Andrea settled in Pasadena, California, where she was heavily involved in the conceptual design process for gaming developments for Boyd Gaming, MGM Resorts International and others.

We stayed friends, however, and soon realized that our collaborative nature, go get 'em attitude and unique aesthetic made us very successful with our clients. Partnering up and launching our own firm seemed like the best next step. We wanted to create a workspace that designers wanted to come work at — competition free and fun.

We worked hard to avoid taking out loans or borrowing money to launch the business, **Avenue Interior Design**, and fortunately the overhead to start the company was very low; we each invested under \$10K of our own money initially. Between our friends and family, we were able to receive the guidance needed to help us focus on our initial ideas and business plans for the company, which ultimately helped us form our longer term goals. We also felt very fortunate to have one another. We were able to bounce ideas around and give each other the support and confidence we needed to start a business in an industry that was in a very low place at the time.

We were pretty lucky to get a small studio in Venice shortly after we launched. It was far from fancy, but a good place to start. Before we landed our first hospitality client we had our fair share of interesting projects: a small hair salon remodel and a residential client who wanted a nursery and office hybrid, and insisted on putting the crib in the closet! We shared a bathroom with our neighbors — two Venice creatives who had been there for our 30 years and had

put a sign on our shared door that said: “Enter at Your Own Risk.” But, we knew that we shared the same ambitions and would work equally hard to create something that we’re proud of.

Our brand quickly grew, and projects started coming in faster than we ever could have imagined. It was evident that we needed to quickly secure the brand and direction we were moving in. We committed to refusing to be defined by any one style, and instead opted to apply a fresh, distinctive and exclusive design to each project with consideration to brand, demographic and location. We’ve worked with **MGM Resorts International**, Stations Casinos and SBE, which has allowed us to be part of groundbreaking destinations for some of the biggest names in the hospitality industry. We’ve also had a lot of rejection, but that only allowed us to grow and further develop our aesthetics and skills.

Last year was a monumental year for Avenue. We doubled our revenue and tripled the size of our team. In 2015, we had an internal team of five with a few outside consultants. At one point last year we had 14 designers in the office and a team of eight outside consultants. To experience that kind of growth so quickly was equally exhilarating and terrifying. We were working on very high-profile, confidential projects for a number of new clients, and at the same time organizing a relatively new design team. It was a new challenge in many ways, but we’re lucky to have a solid core team who stayed the course with us.

Nine years into it, we continue to surprise ourselves. We’re so grateful for every successful installation, happy client and new project — every single one seems too good to be true. Looking back on the portfolio we’ve built just makes us want to do more. As business owners, with a growing staff, it’s impossible to not worry about failing — there’s so much at stake. But it’s that fear that breeds success and keeps us going.