

Julien Legeard and Valmira Gashi of New York-based Legeard Studio on Their Compelling Yin-and-Yang Partnership

The designer and architect duo are known to create magic with their complementary design styles

She grew up in Kosovo and left the country as a war refugee. He hails from the Loire Valley in France where he grew up appreciating its architectural marvels. And yet, Valmira Gashi and Julien Legeard's paths were destined to cross in a country that belonged to neither. "Growing up in Kosovo, architecture wasn't exactly on my radar. I was always drawn to maths and art. Maths is the same in every language, and it's very logical, while art allowed me to express my creative side. When I discovered architecture, I felt it combined these two disciplines perfectly and I couldn't see myself doing anything else," says Gashi.

After moving to America in the late 1990s, Gashi first stayed in the tri-state area, then in a small town in Texas. "As you can imagine, this small town worshiped football more than design, so I wasn't able to expand my horizons within architecture as much as I would've liked. I ended up moving back to New York where I received my master's at The Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture at City College of New York and then began my career there. I now live in Miami."

For Legeard, architecture wasn't the obvious choice: "I didn't formally study architecture, but I had grown up in an environment where artisanship and metalwork were held in high regard. I ended up attending business school, but after moving to New York, I felt inspired and rejuvenated by everything the city had to offer. I started to feel a renewed sense of purpose and decided to lean into design and architecture once I understood that I was driven by and passionate about the beauty of things. I started working at a company specialising in metalwork and later started my former company, The Prestige Group, which focused on connecting artisans with architecture firms."

Over time, Legeard began feeling drawn to the client side of the business. "I soon felt a calling to set up my own architecture and design studio," he says, and Gashi chimes in, "We worked on a project together that ultimately fell apart, but we always like to joke and say that even though it was a disaster, at least we found each other. We didn't start working together immediately, but once I graduated in 2020, I began thinking about what I wanted to do next. It was peak-pandemic and everyone was feeling a sort of shift in priorities. At the time, Julien was doing a lot of construction management through his former company, but it was slowly becoming

more and more design-driven. We decided to join forces, and our backgrounds allowed us to become a true studio focused exclusively on architecture and interior design."

The partnership works well: Legeard is gregarious and extroverted and thrives on high energy, while Gashi is centred and grounded, a quality Legeard admits has truly allowed him to stop, think and expand the business in meaningful ways. Their sense of balance extends well beyond their personalities. "It manifests in our style too. I find my aesthetic draws from all the places I've lived, from Kosovo to New York to Texas, to even the semester I spent in Barcelona during college," says Gashi, while Legeard's ethos is more informed by the chateausque references of his childhood.

Each of Legeard Studio's projects holds a mirror to Legeard and Gashi's individual sensibilities, and their 432 Park Avenue project is no exception. Designed for a successful art-loving couple from the finance world, the home serves as a showcase of its owners' extensive art collection. "They looked to us to design a space that would feel like home without being overwhelming; where they could just knock back and relax. They don't often entertain, so we created many intimate spaces where they could host people if they wanted, or otherwise just slink away from the world," notes Legeard. He and Gashi also created several custom pieces, including the two curved sofas in the living room, a floating dining table with a marble counter and custom Plexi-bays, and a custom desk with a pewter finish in the office.

Of all the projects they have designed together, the Tribeca Loft is admittedly Gashi's most cherished of all. "It was the first project I helped design. I remember visiting it after completion and being overwhelmed with emotion on seeing something I laboured over come to life," she recounts. She still distinctly remembers the brief: "A clean and chic haven for a young couple." In the same vein, the designers espoused an open concept for the layout. "One of the biggest challenges—also one of the biggest highlights—was the kitchen. We gutted the old shell and redesigned the layout to integrate a large kitchen island, and in turn, a clean, continuous countertop. While the overall aesthetic was modern and minimalist, we added ornamental flourishes by way of materials and finishes.

A landmark moment of Legeard's career was the opening of the La Grande Boucherie (the largest restaurant in New York City), during the pandemic, no less. "It truly changed my perspective of design and what it means to people, especially during a time when the restaurant industry had gone through so much. My favourite part of this job is the emotional translation from drawing to reality, which was really felt through this project. I like to look at drawings as a composition of different notes that come together to create an emotional reaction and make people feel something through our designs. La Grande Boucherie was undoubtedly a project that was able to do that," he says.

For Legeard and Gashi, owning a client's vision is the foremost priority. "Our clients appreciate that we can expand their viewpoints without taking away their vision. For instance, we've had some tell us that they favour a specific design sensibility, which we honour, but we might also share materials from a different aesthetic if we feel it aligns with their style. The end goal is still their vision, but it's elevated and different," explains Legeard. In the Soho Penthouse they designed a few years ago, the industrial-chic aesthetic was informed equally by its bachelor

owner and the surrounding cityscape. "We wanted to connect his style with the skyline and decided to go for a refined industrial aesthetic with a gunmetal blue finish repeated throughout the home."

The pair seeks design inspiration from everywhere. "If we're talking about geometric innovation, Zaha Hadid is someone who naturally comes to mind. Equally, Neri Oxman is someone I consider noteworthy for her ability to approach architecture as art and combine design, biology and computing. I also admire designers like Kelly Wearstler who aren't afraid to take risks and push the envelope," avers Gashi. Legeard's background in craftsmanship, meanwhile, nods to architects like Axel Vervoordt, whose refined understanding of heritage, materiality, textures and scale is echoed in Legeard's style. "I also find myself endlessly inspired by our team, particularly the women at Legeard Studio. Women in architecture, especially in leadership positions, are still a rarity, so it's inspiring to have so many women leading our studio," says Legeard.

Just a year and a half ago, Legeard Studio consisted of just Legeard and Gashi in a small coworking space. "Now we're proud to have 25 employees and growing," beams Legeard. But there are miles to go before they can check off all that's left to do. Evidently for the pair, the best is yet to come.