



Sisters Katy Svalbe and Yasmine Ghoniem make up Amber Road, a Sydney-based emerging studio with a diverse portfolio and aesthetic.

words ALICIA SCIBERRAS



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1\_ KATY SVALBE AND YASMINE GHONIEM OF AMBER ROAD. PHOTOGRAPHY: COLE BENNETTS.

2\_ CRONULLA RESIDENCE, COMPLETED IN 2014. ARTWORK: FRENCHY. PHOTOGRAPHY: PRUE ROSCOE.

3\_ CHINTA KECHIL RESTAURANT IN DOUBLE BAY, NEW SOUTH WALES, COMPLETED IN 2014. PHOTOGRAPHY: COLE BENNETTS.



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## Profile

As they will happily tell you, the working relationship between sisters Katy Svalbe and Yasmine Ghoniem began after many years of living apart. They were born and grew up in separate parts of the world, but were united in 2011 to work on a major design project. A year later they launched Amber Road – Svalbe returned to Australia from living in Spain, and Ghoniem was already working on solo interior projects.

It took six months for the pair to decide on the name Amber Road, which they derived from the name of an ancient trade route linking the Baltic region with North Africa for the transferral of the gem amber. The name became a metaphor for connecting Svalbe (of Latvian heritage) with Ghoniem (of Middle Eastern heritage). Adding to this significance of the name, the duo has a particular affinity with amber, which for them now encompasses the ideas of travelling, textures and a close relationship with the nature of materials.

Svalbe was born in Western Australia, where she grew up with her Latvian father, while Ghoniem (the younger of the two) was born in Kuwait and grew up throughout the Middle East with her Egyptian father. Both sisters had long thought the integration of their respective backgrounds in landscape architecture and interior design would make sense.

Svalbe and Ghoniem are mindful of making every one of their projects unique with the inclusion of custom-designed pieces. "We love doing those next-step touches – we really like to think you can individualize every project based on the client's desires and we really hope that comes across in our work," says Ghoniem. It is not uncommon to find the duo collaborating with artisans on projects. At Kobe Jones restaurant in Melbourne, a backlit sake library is punctuated with handmade macramé pendants that Amber Road collaborated on with Melbourne-based artist Sarah Parkes. At Chinta Kechil restaurant in Sydney's Double Bay (Stage 1 was completed in 2014), the pair created an authentic Malay



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dining experience rich in texture, with exposed timber joists, handmade tiles and thirty handmade hessian lanterns that cover the entire ceiling. The sisters hand-dyed each lantern in red wine. Stage 2 of the project is due to be completed later this year.

Three projects that demonstrate the diversity of Amber Road's aesthetic include the MP Executive Office, Snap Fitness and Paper Planes. All three projects presented completely different briefs and were resolved with completely different outcomes – a testament to the studio's versatility. For the MP Executive Office space in Western Sydney, the duo incorporated elegant custom veneer finishes, teamed with classic wallpapers that are offset by the modern furniture. But when it came to American gym franchise Snap Fitness, the

4\_ KOBE JONES RESTAURANT AND BAR IN MELBOURNE, COMPLETED IN 2012. PHOTOGRAPHY: BENE HERNANDEZ.

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Yasmine Ghoniem,  
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design injected some fun and individuality into the space. The duo approached the brief by selecting three quintessential gym items – bag, runners and sweat towel – and these feature in the design. Exposed bricks and wire fencing have been paired with a punchy red colour and this design will be carried across to all future Snap Fitness fitouts. Paper Planes restaurant is located in Bondi and was inspired by the busy streets of Tokyo. It gets its name from the iconic folded-metal cranes that hang from the restaurant's ceiling.

Most recently the pair completed a residential project in Cronulla, with a dream client and complete design freedom. The existing house was a three-bedroom weatherboard residence by the seaside that needed to house four family members. The project saw the duo not only source

furniture, but also customize joinery, select artwork and create a ten-metre-long floating concrete bench to bridge the divide between two living areas and encourage a more communal experience. "It is so rare that you have that synchronicity and trust with a client," says Svalbe.

Creating design solutions for modern-day living is what drives the sisters in what they refer to as "compact shared living." These are buildings that encourage people to live more sustainably and are more focused on an integrated residential community. "We want residents to experience life surrounded by others who share similar values and want to create something together ... I would love to think that in the future there is the possibility for families to still live together and still embrace human connection but also have the ability to step away from that and be alone when they want," says Ghoniem.

As for what comes next, Svalbe and Ghoniem are already busy communicating with developers to find the best site for a compact shared living facility. This concept takes many forms, so it is about finding the ideal scale at which to start the project. In the meantime, the duo is naturally moving towards more residential projects, which will surely be a continuation of the pair's sensitive investigations into human connection and the built environment. **A**

5+6\_ LORD MAYOR'S OFFICE IN WESTERN SYDNEY, COMPLETED IN 2013 IN COLLABORATION WITH SONIA VAN DE HAAR. PHOTOGRAPHY: BRIGID ARNOTT.

7\_ SNAP FITNESS IN SYDNEY'S CBD, COMPLETED IN 2013. PHOTOGRAPHY: OLIVER BLACK.



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