

DOMUS *Life*



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ARCHITECTURE

FAMILY AFFAIR

*An engaging architecture firm that
always exceeds the expectations of its clients.
With a husband and wife at its helm,
we were intrigued to find out more...*

Some of the great design partnerships of the past century have been husband and wife: Charles and Ray Eames, John and Sylvia Reid, Robin and Lucienne Day to name but three. So, in a changing world, it's refreshing to find a couple continuing the tradition. Ben and Jelena Cousins head up a 15-strong team at the practice that bears their name, Cousins & Cousins, perfectly complementing each other's skills.

The couple met when they were both starting their careers in the late 90s. Ben Cousins grew up in the corner of north London where Cousins & Cousins is now based, working for practices such as Hopkins Architects

and ESA, where he played a key role in projects including the conversion of the former Younger's Brewery in Edinburgh to the Dynamic Earth Centre, and the refurbishment of Grade I-listed Chandos House in London's Cavendish Square.

Croatian-born Jelena Cousins began her career at David Gibson, Wilkinson Eyre and Hawkins\Brown, honing her skills in both residential and commercial architecture.

By the time she established Cousins Architects in 2006, her repertoire was focused on complex project design, management and delivery for the commercial and residential sectors.

Today, under the umbrella of Cousins & Cousins, Jelena is known for her ability to challenge the development of subterranean and sky space in the high net worth residential market.

Initially working independently, Ben and Jelena began to collaborate on projects, including their own homes, testing out their ability to partner in business. In 2012, they finally took the plunge and joined forces, completing the Vegetarian Cottage in Hackney as their first project. The innovative yet sympathetic refurbishment of this charming Victorian cottage has set the tone for the practice, its ethos and approach to design. >>



The Vegetarian Cottage, Malvern Road in Hackney by Cousins & Cousins

INTERVIEW

COUSINS & COUSINS

The Vegetarian Cottage is simple, elegant and timeless, yet incredibly complex. Is this typical of Cousins & Cousins projects?

Jelena: Not all of them, but I think there is a danger in overdesigning spaces. Our clients at the Vegetarian Cottage wanted a gentle update that would make the house more usable without conflicting with the spirit of its original form and interior. It took a little persuasion from us to make them see that what we proposed would work, but they tell us that their home makes them feel comfortable and inspired in equal measures. That is what we are all about. We want to harness a vision and create something that makes the client proud, happy and engaged with their surroundings. Size, period and location aren't barriers if you apply this ethos.

You both grew up in cities. How has your urban upbringing influenced your designs?

Ben: The more urban the environment, the more creative you have to be about how you apportion and use space. We would all like more of it, but the reality is that it isn't always possible. Subterranean development has opened people's eyes to the possibilities that lie beneath their home, but we also look at how we can develop above ground. The tightest spaces and most awkward sites all have possibilities, and the engineering challenges that have to be overcome to achieve an end result are a big part of what makes urban development so exciting.

Do you have a constant source of inspiration?

Jelena: My favourite architect is Carlo Scarpa – I find myself looking to his work regularly because his architecture challenges the mind and what the eye can see. I also love the precedent that architects such

as Nicholas Grimshaw and Richard Rogers have set. I would love to have been fresh out of university when these architects were graduating. It was a time of free thinking in architecture when possibilities challenged the mind, before we had computers to work out the viability of our schemes for us!

Ben: I'm impressed every day by great feats of engineering such as Centrepont, which was groundbreaking in its day. I also look to the serene and almost monastic lines of [Belgian architect] Vincent Van Duysen's work.

What has been the practice's greatest design challenge?

Ben: I think we're working on it now! We have designed a mews house in Powis Mews in Notting Hill which has an exceptional two-storey basement. We have had to identify how to refract light around the subterranean spaces without compromising the interior. We have worked with glazing companies to develop their standard products to work within our specific design requirements and produce a bespoke glazed wall to run the entire length of the back of the house, to bounce light around at each level.

What does Cousins & Cousins have in the pipeline?

Ben: We are on site in Notting Hill on two projects, recreating the mews house we talked about above, and also in Bedford Gardens, where we are redesigning the interior of a Victorian house and its mews house, digging out an impressive basement beneath the house and garden. We are also working on a similar project in Islington which is one storey above ground and two storeys below, and on a new-build in Highgate, which I think will be one of our finest projects. It is located in a really tight conservation area and we have been

pleasantly surprised not to have received any objections to the plans we submitted. It is vindication that local residents and the planning office feel our house will have a sense of place in the existing surroundings. Our team is also about to start work on a wonderful house in De Beauvoir Town. This is a long-term living arrangement for our clients and as such we are developing with an eye on the future and the changes that may affect their life in the coming years.

Is there a typical Cousins & Cousins client?

Jelena: Not really. We are happy to look at every possibility and because we have a skill set that covers contemporary, period and listed properties, we are fairly versatile. We do work with developers and about half of our work is for companies rather than individuals. With the private homes we work on, our proposals are very much led by the lifestyle of our clients. In London there are lots of similarities because of the challenges people face with their homes – lack of light and space, busy lifestyles, children and a need for each space to be multifunctional. Our translation of these needs may present in a similar way on several projects, but each is unique in its execution. It is not really a house style, more a greater understanding of how to manage a family lifestyle in London.

You have three children. How does your own house reflect your lifestyle?

Ben: The thing about raising a family in London is that if you get the home environment right, the rest often falls into place. We moved not too long ago, so our family life is now closer to the office, which cuts down on commuting. Our own home is still a work in progress, though, as we use it as a testing pad for ideas.

Jelena: I think we will probably move again before it is finished!

Is there a successor to the business in the family?

Jelena: We would love our children to have a healthy interest in design of all disciplines, but they are still young and the pull of the playground is far greater than the idea of an art gallery! In London we will always be surrounded by great design and we do try to get out as a family to see what the city has to offer. I am sure we will do more of that when the children are older. Right now, the reality is that a lot of mine and Ben's ideas are born while we sit and chat in the park.

What's next for Cousins & Cousins?

Jelena: We would love to design a public building in London and are fortunate to have been given an opportunity recently to explore what could be our first cultural project. It's early days but we hope it will focus the practice in another direction and make our overall offering much greater.

Ben: We are also looking at expansion. We have a great team but with more and more enquiries, we will undoubtedly need to grow. We would also like to be able to create opportunities for graduate architects – the job market is so competitive and we remember all too well what it was like taking that first step. So, more projects and more people: an exciting time all round.

Read our extended interview with Cousins & Cousins at domusnova.com/cousinsandcousins

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01. COUSINS & COUSINS Ben and Jelena Cousins of Cousins & Cousins
02. CLEVELAND SQUARE Interior of Cleveland Square by Cousins & Cousins
03. CARLTON HILL Interior of Carlton Hill by Cousins & Cousins

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