

Architects of the month

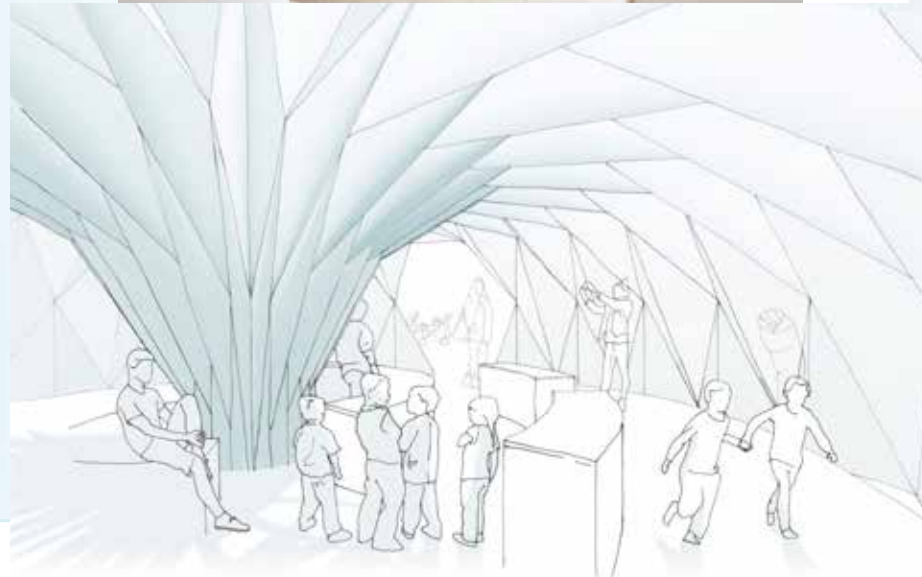
# Inside and Out

Ben and Jelena Cousins prove that husband and wife teams can provide the best of both worlds when it comes to creative architecture



From urban space-saving solutions to indulgent country residences, Cousins & Cousins illustrate their transformative nature in a wide portfolio of commercial, residential, public art and cultural projects too

“OUR DIFFERENCES COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER, FUSING TOGETHER TO CREATE A UNIQUE SOLUTION”



"I'VE NOT BEEN INFLUENCED BY A SINGLE ELEMENT, BUT A SERIES OF OBSERVATIONS AND LEARNINGS THROUGHOUT MY LIFE"

When you ask Ben Cousins what makes the practice he runs with his wife Jelena a stand-out in the architectural world, the response is passionate and immediate: "Detail, detail, detail." It is this meticulous eye for proportion, scale, texture and colour that has led them to winning Interior Architects of the year 2017 and being nominated again for the 2018 award. The couple met while training at The Bartlett School of Architecture. Their careers started quite separately while they enjoyed a "profound nurturing effect on both design and the way we think" at big international practices like Hawkins/Brown, Wilkinson Eyre and Hopkins. This background makes sense of their approach to smaller projects. Their domestic portfolio clearly demonstrates BIG out-of-the-box thinking quite unexpected in a smaller setting. Who else would elect to choose huge sculptural staircases in a small mews house. But with that attention to detail and a real understanding of proportion they continue to successfully pull this off.

**What made you become architects?**

**Jelena:** My mother was an artist and my dad a naval architect. I guess the combination helped. **Ben:** I built my first house at 13 years old – albeit a treehouse made from the remains of a timber outbuilding my father had pulled down in his house in Wales. My father recently found the original drawings showing basic construction details and sketches of the assembly. I think my fate was sealed from an early age.

**What are your greatest influences?**

**Jelena:** My mother. She was an artist with an eye for beautiful furniture. My parents commissioned an architect friend to design their house in Croatia which is a modern interpretation of the vernacular coastal architecture. **Ben:** I've not been influenced by a single element, but rather a series of observations and learnings throughout my life. These stem as a child from deconstructing everything in sight to learn how it works, to the subsequent passion of the mechanics behind the fabrication of objects to achieve an aesthetic composition – this can range from an appreciation of the pared-back elements of nature, to the Modernist mantra of form following function.

**How do they manifest in your work?**

**Jelena:** Our architecture responds to the site location and its cultural and natural

environment. The composition of the spaces and elements in the building are a direct influence. **Ben:** We both have an aesthetic eye and a refined sense of scale and proportion. Jelena will often come up with the concept, and we will develop this together to establish how this could be constructed in the most simple and elegant way to retain the concept. Our individual influences and differences complement each other, fusing together to create a unique solution.

**What is your proudest achievement?**

**Jelena:** Our three children. Architecture-wise is setting up our own practice, even if both being in it can be hard. **Ben:** Ditto. Plus cycling 1,500km in six days to Cannes last year.

**Is sustainability an issue for you and how do you address it?**

**Ben:** Yes, very much so. We completed a near Passivhaus refurb to a Georgian house in Islington last year. We are now very excited to be working with a developer to achieve full Passivhaus and WELL building standards on high-end houses in central London with our interior design, which we are calling Super-prime Passivhaus Retrofit – a first for London. Watch this space...

**Do you prefer city or country work?**

**Jelena:** Both. We love complex tight urban sites with multiple constraints,



as these can often define the architecture. Equally where the plots are larger you can explore a different architectural narrative and typology.

**What is most important to you about the architect client relationship?**  
**Both:** Trust

**What would your dream commission be?**  
**Jelena:** An art gallery or museum

**What will residential houses look like in 50 years?**  
**Both:** I think sustainability will become more and more important as will finding ever more clever ways to build, such as our Passivhaus Retrofit model, or being able to efficiently 3-D print houses or materials. We are developing an 'on gauge' volumetric modular housing system with a German supplier which can provide Passivhaus standard in much less time. I think App's and The Internet of Things will slowly improve how we monitor and best use our houses. But this is only scratching the surface of things to come...

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**FAVOURITE BOOK?**

**Jelena:** *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera  
**Ben:** *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tart

**FAVOURITE FILM?**

**Jelena:** *Black Cat White Cat*  
**Ben:** *Taxi Driver*

**FAVOURITE FOOD?**

**Jelena:** *Scampi alla Buzara*  
**Ben:** Anything by Jelena's mother

**FAVOURITE CITY?**

**Jelena:** Naples  
**Ben:** London

**FAVOURITE MUSIC?**

**Jelena:** *Arctic Monkeys*  
**Ben:** Jazz with a bit of funk

**YOUR FAVOURITE ARCHITECTS**

**Jelena:** Carlo Scarpa, Tadao Ando  
**Ben:** Vincent van Duysen

**FAVOURITE ARTISTS?**

**Jelena:** Richard Wilson, Radomir Damjanovic Damjan

**YOUR FAVOURITE RESTAURANT**

*The Ned* in London

**COFFEE HOUSE**

*Doppio* in Kentish Town

