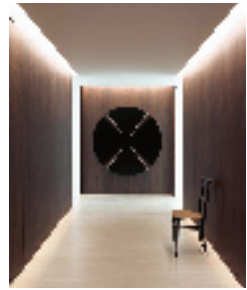


STEP INTO THE ST. REGIS OR BERGDORF GOODMAN OR TIFFANY'S OR THE HAZELTON AND YOU ENTER THE WORLD OF YABU PUSHELBERG



# HEDONISTS

HOW TWO TORONTO INTERIOR DESIGNERS REINVENTED DECADENCE \* BY OLIVIA STREN



**LUNCH #1: PASS THE CHABLIS** \* It's a flawless spring day in Manhattan, and the noonday sun is dressing the Hudson River in a sheath of silver sequins: a perfectly opulent backdrop for a luncheon with George Yabu and Glenn Pushelberg. We meet at Perry Street, a Jean-Georges Vongerichten bistro that faces the river from the lobby of one of Richard Meier's glassy condo buildings, where Yabu and Pushelberg have a 4,000-square-foot apartment on the second floor. "We thought it would be nice to have a little pied-à-terre in New York," says Pushelberg.

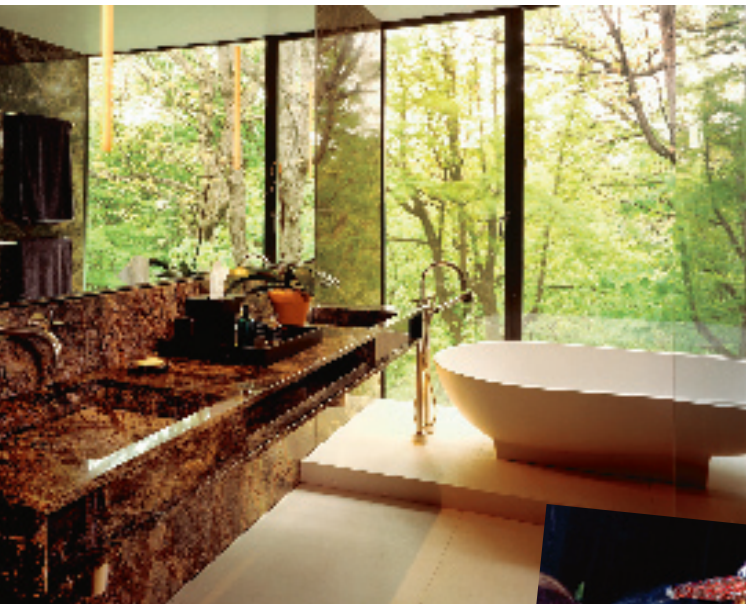
Units sold in 2002 for \$2,000 (U.S.) a square foot. Yabu and Pushelberg bought theirs on a whim, making the decision while in a cab on their



**HOME SWEET HOME**  
Yabu and Pushelberg's New York apartment is a showcase of their eclectic tastes: the coffee table is by Yves Klein; the painting, *Fight*, is by Zhang Enli; a deer head by Kohei Nawa is covered in glass balls (opposite)



## THEY HAVE AN UNASHAMED GLUTTONY FOR A LIFE FURNISHED WITH EXOTIC TRAVEL, MULTIPLE HOMES AND COLOURFUL FRIENDS



**IDYLL WORSHIP** Clockwise from top left: Yabu and Pushelberg's homes in Toronto and South Beach; they cancelled their annual Christmas parties when they got out of hand

way from Pearson back to their Toronto home in Moore Park.

"We couldn't even afford it," says Yabu, through the broad, terrifically white smile that rarely leaves his face.

Pushelberg's long arms fling around as he relives the excitement, "It was like, Oh fuck it! What are we living for? Let's buy it!" Now they're neighbours with Calvin Klein.

The waitress glides over with a bottle of chablis. "Yay!" exclaims Pushelberg, blue eyes gleaming. "Isn't this great?" he says, taking a sip of wine and peering out at the Hudson, a curious tourist in his own life.

Yabu and Pushelberg have just returned from a two-week business trip to Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Macao, Mumbai, Paris and Miami. They are at the helm of Canada's most successful interior design firm, and among the world's leading luxury hotel and retail designers. They are currently working on 25 hotels in 14 countries. In Toronto, they designed the just-opened Hazelton Hotel and are doing the new Four Seasons on Bay. Manhattan's posh shopping capitals—Bergdorf Goodman, Neiman Marcus, Carolina Herrera, Piazza Sempione, Kate Spade and Tiffany & Co.—are all Yabu Pushelberg designs. They've just been hired to build a Louis Vuitton store in Hong Kong, complete with VIP salons. But their success can be measured as much by the prestige of their project as by those they turn down: they passed on the Shore Club in South Beach (they were already working on the W Hotel, right next door), decided against the Mandarin Oriental in Barcelona (the client, a Spanish tobacco millionairess, was an emotionally volatile divorcee) and declined an offer to revamp Paris's Galeries Lafayette (not another department store!).

Pushelberg is the showman, the rainmaker, negotiating deals and courting clients; Yabu is the visual director, generating concepts and closely overseeing every project. While they have intro-

duced to Canada a clean, modernist aesthetic, what makes them truly stand out is their unashamed gluttony for a life festive and grand—furnished with exotic travel, decadent homes and colourful friends.

They are experts in hedonism, perfectionists in pleasure.

Their "little pied-à-terre" in New York, like their commercial designs, is minimalist but not sterile. Bathed in light from floor-to-ceiling windows, the space is both clean and textured, enlivened by assiduously chosen eclectica. Floors are travertine (the couple ripped up the floors twice to get them right), while the walls in the hallways (complete with hidden doors) are veneered with wood from a single Indian laurel tree. In the main room, there's a Parisian Lucite screen, a Brazilian jacaranda credenza, a deer adorned with glass balls by Japanese artist Kohei Nawa, and a cast-bronze chair from Nienkämper ("What a cutie!" Pushelberg says). Sitting on a side table is a copy of *Miami Interiors* that contains a photo spread of the couple's South Beach vacation home with its poolside bamboo garden. The floors in the apartment's TV room are fully covered in broad, cushy, hip-high pillows (to enter, you literally have to dive in). And, oh, to live the life of Yabu and Pushelberg's shampoo bottle. It perches pristinely on a travertine shelf in the master bathroom, basking in soft lilac backlighting.

A Yabu Pushelberg design—like a luxury handbag—is about artful detail, crisp lines and careful craftsmanship. The way today's consumer loves artisanal bread and organic anything, YP divines a world that feeds a cultural appetite for the tactile, natural and storied. If the Victorian Arts and Crafts movement was a rejection of industrialization, YP's style is a reaction to an

alienating BlackBerry-fuelled society, and also a mirror of our love affair with rarefied, Hollywood-style luxury.

As the Perry Street lunch winds down, the waitress wanders over and asks if there's time for dessert. "Yes!" says Pushelberg in an "is the Pope Catholic?" kind of way. There's always time for dessert.

**TORONTO IS BORING \*** "Guess what we did!" says Pushelberg. "We bought another house!" It's an oceanfront vacation home set on three quarters of an acre of natural dunes just outside East Hampton. "It's so raw and rustic. So un-Hamptons! It'll be our home away from home on the eastern seaboard—without the chintz! We're going to rip it down and start over!"

They bought this fourth home on a whim, too, the way someone else might splurge on a pair of shoes. They were in Milan for the furniture fair and saw an ad for the house in *The New York Times'* real estate section. "We called our assistant and asked to have our flight redirected through JFK. 'We have to go to the Hamptons,' we told her. 'There's a house we want!'"

We're having another lunch, this time at the TD Centre's YP-designed Bymark. Pushelberg speaks quickly, his sentences riddled with unfinished tangents—he doesn't even bother completing one thought before leaping into the next, as if he grows bored of an idea the instant he voices it. He moves the same way he talks; he's six feet tall and takes lunging, bouncy strides. Yabu is more spare and contained. While Pushelberg holds forth—fidgiting, gesticulating, restlessly swinging his legs over the arm of his chair—Yabu sits still, listening intensely, hands folded tidily.

"We're going to build a fireplace on the flat roof," says Yabu. "There won't be a swimming pool—the ocean will be our pool."

"It has to feel like driftwood," says Pushelberg while perusing the wine list. "Our houses are the only projects where we can do whatever we want. No clients fucking things up. Should we order a bottle of chablis?" The response is yes. Pushelberg agrees: "Yay!"

For Bymark, YP used birch trees and log stacks as dividers, in contrast to the precision of the Mies van der Rohe towers. "We wanted this restaurant to feel open and not too exclusive," explains



**SHOCK APPEAL** The firm designed the W Hotel in New York (top) and Hong Kong's Lane Crawford department store

it's Toronto the Good Enough. Everything is just good enough for this city."

"Toronto is a good place to work. There are no distractions," says Pushelberg, trying for a positive spin.

"It's boring," Yabu interjects.

"Boring," Pushelberg agrees.

**BUT KITCHENER IS EVEN MORE BORING \*** About boredom, Pushelberg can speak from experience: he was raised in Kitchener. ("Like, slit your wrists," he laughs.) His third-generation German immigrant parents, Shirley and Gordon, worked on assembly lines in local car factories. His grandmother was a weaver and his mother was always into crafts, "But it's not like I come from a dynasty of design." A middle child, Pushelberg has a younger brother, who is now an industrial designer, and two sisters (one is an associate dean at Sheridan College and the other, along with her husband, runs the largest Christmas tree farm in Canada). "I escaped in 1972, when I was 17," Pushelberg says. "I ran to Toronto." He toyed



## HOTEL AFTER HOTEL LINED UP FOR THE YABU PUSHELBERG TREATMENT. THEIR MINIMUM FEE FOR A PROJECT IS \$1.5 MILLION

with dreams of architecture but didn't have the required credits in physics, so decided to study interior design at Ryerson, because he thought it might be interesting. He met George in class.

Yabu grew up in Cabbagetown ("Before it was hip," he's quick to add), the youngest of six. His father, Jitsukazu, was a successful boat builder and entrepreneur in Japan before moving to Prince Rupert, where he built fishing boats for a living. His mother, Masako, set sail for Canada at 18. "In 1930, it was bold for a Japanese girl to come over on her own," Yabu says admiringly. "She wanted to see the world." His parents were introduced in Vancouver.

During the war, the Yabus lost everything and were sent to internment camps, where four of George's siblings were born. The family eventually headed to Toronto by train; his father continued working as a boat builder in B.C. during the summer, and his mother sewed baby clothing in a factory. George, who was born in Toronto, revealed an early proclivity for drawing. ("I had an obsession with streetcars. I used to be able to draw them in perfect detail.") As a high school student at Jarvis Collegiate, he was interested in a career in urban planning or landscape architecture. He signed up for interior design at Ryerson for many of the reasons Pushelberg did: he didn't have the science credits he needed for architecture, and it seemed like fun.

Irene Bell, a retired Ryerson interior design professor, taught the pair for three years. "The poor class that followed them always had to live up to them, because it was the Yabu Pushelberg Year," she says. "No matter what test or project you threw at them, they jumped into it with joy. They've maintained that joy since then."

**YABU AND PUSHELBERG IN LOVE** \* They'd been casual friends at school, but it wasn't until three years after graduating from Ryerson that they bumped into each other on the street. Each had been working on small, unsatisfying freelance projects, struggling to kick-start their careers, and they decided to share a studio on King Street. They both talk giddily about those early years. "We'd stay up all night, like kids," says Pushelberg. "Well, we're still kids, I guess." They slept under their desks and refused to watch TV or turn on the radio.

"I just wanted to block it," says Yabu, "I didn't want to be influenced by popular culture. We were insane people."

They worked so closely that they began collaborating on each other's projects until it was too hard to decipher who was working on what. "It was a business thing," says Yabu. "It wasn't love at first. But great things happen when you don't plan them."

Their *Lady and the Tramp* spaghetti moment happened at the drafting table. "When we first started working together and we'd do a rendering, I'd start at one end and George would be at the other end and we'd meet in the middle of the same drawing." They've now been finishing each other's drawings—and sentences—for 27 years.

"Every year is easier than the last one. Better," says Pushelberg. "It's kinda weird; people look at us and think we're..." "Freaks." "Total freaks."

**"I JUST MET THE MESSIAH"** \* Their big break came in 1984. They pitched a concept for Kiku, a new Korean restaurant at Yonge and St. Clair. They'd stayed up all night to slap together a drawing, and showed up two hours late. "It was so embarrassing, no one could understand it," says Pushelberg. They never landed the job, but somebody at that meeting saw in the couple an energy and wacky imagination and recommended them to Joe Mimran and Alfred Sung, who were looking for a design firm to create a new Queen Street store called Club Monaco.

Christine Ralphs, the store's former creative director, was in charge of hiring designers. She interviewed 20 firms, and at the time, Toronto design followed either Italian or Japanese trends. "I wanted someone who could bring fun to the party," she says. "I decided, 'I'm not hiring anybody until I meet the Messiah.' Then I met Glenn. He was energetic and funny and always very chic, and I said to Joe [Mimran], 'I just met the Messiah and he's bringing his partner tomorrow.'"

For the flagship on Queen West, YP built a boxing ring to showcase the mannequins, as well as a café in the back. Their sophomore effort, a

Club Monaco in the Beach, was outfitted with a lifeguard tower and sandcastle murals.

What YP created for Club Monaco was the concept of store as playground. It was an envelope-pushing approach at a time when clothing stores followed the Fairweather formula: crowded chrome racks and busy carpeting. Club Monaco had stained concrete, raw steel and brushed aluminum, and used a neutral palette (blues, paper-bag browns, whites and greys) to complement the brand's simple garments. Clothing was artfully curated and lighting was theatrical. "It was about setting up clothing like vegetables," Pushelberg explains. "When you go to a grocery store, everything is colour blocked. There's variety and there's clarity."

"They created a new benchmark in retail design," says Ralphs, "And a lot of imitators followed."

By the late '80s, YP had a spacious east-end office on Booth Avenue (the one they still occupy) and a staff of 30. But their ambition was not supported by a sound business plan. Then the recession hit, business evaporated and they faced bankruptcy. "I had to take the computer and all the copies of our drawings home every night because we were worried that the next day we'd come back and find the doors locked," says Yabu.

They laid off 24 employees and Pushelberg hawked his collection of vintage furniture for cash. When their financial situation



**OFF THE RACK** The stores they designed in the '80s for Club Monaco raised the retail bar with theatrical lighting and artful presentation

grew truly desperate, they did something quintessentially Yabu Pushelberg: "We went to Hawaii!" they declare in unison through bursts of laughter. If they were going to be broke, why not enjoy financial ruin somewhere beautiful? Luckily, as soon as they returned to Toronto they received an offer to design a department store in Taiwan for a \$1 million fee.

"We never wanted to run the business—we always wanted to design," says Pushelberg. "But we had to take control of our lives." Pushelberg decided to walk away from the drafting tables and mind the finances instead. "George is a much better designer than I am," he says, "and I'm much better at managing people and at handling the financial side of things." It's proven a strategic move.

That fortuitous Taiwanese gig introduced them to the Asian market, leading to a series of retail jobs in China and, eventually, in the U.S. Yabu Pushelberg brought something imaginative and a little outré to each project. Perhaps riskiest was their design of New York's Bergdorf Goodman, where they decided to build the cosmetics floor in the spacious basement, instead of the conventional position at the store entrance. "The vendors were outraged. It was the first time that was done," says Yabu. "But it was really successful, and Barney's did the same thing later."

**CHRISTMAS IN THE DOMINICAN** \* With any retail project, every square inch must be a reflection of the brand's look—colours, finishes, signage—leaving little room for artistry. By the late '90s, Yabu and Pushelberg were yearning to try something different.

When their design of the Toronto restaurant Monsoon won a 1998 James Beard award, they got a call from Barry Sternlicht, the then-chairman of Starwood Hotels & Resorts and founder of the hip and stylish W Hotels. He asked YP to design W's New York flagship, a 500-room hotel with a 500-seat restaurant and a nightclub. Working with a \$57-million budget, they outfitted the rooms in black, white and charcoal and used mirrored headboards and dark-to-light gradations in the wallcoverings to create the illusion of space. The result is a sexy, serene refuge from the chaos of Times Square. "There is a psychological element to cocooning," says Pushelberg. "It's about creating emotional experiences for people. If you're in a W, you want to feel sensuous. It's about the night, it's about possibilities. And if you're going to the Four Seasons, it's about feeling like you're a prince or a princess. It's rarefied."

Hotel after hotel subsequently lined up for the YP treatment. Highlights on their current to-do list: St. Regis in Mexico City, Mandarin Oriental in Mumbai, W Hotel in Milan, Four Seasons in Dubai and Four Seasons Residences in Bora-Bora (or "Boring Boring," as they like to call it). They are also designing the first 1 Hotel in Seattle, a brand new chain of green hotels also founded by Sternlicht. For each project, YP secures a formidable fee—from \$1.5 to \$3 million.

Today they have a staff of 60 in Toronto and 23 in their New York branch (which opened in 2003). Each office is divided into teams. "Before we start a project, Glenn and George will share their vision with us," says team leader Grace Plawinski. "George will often share a few words to inspire us. Like, 'Armani goes to Hollywood.' He's very hands on. If it's the leg on a piece of furniture he doesn't like, or the fabric on a pillow, he'll change it."

"People forget that Yabu Pushelberg is over 20 years old," says *Canadian House & Home* publisher Lynda Reeves. "The firm was the first in Canada to offer this high degree of excellence in commercial design with a contemporary, edgy, elegant appeal. By the time the rest of the industry got in the game, they had built up a brilliant reputation."

Yabu and Pushelberg like to celebrate their success with their

staff. Last Christmas, they hired a Santa to distribute the company bonus: an all-expense-paid trip to the Dominican Republic. And, until a couple of years ago, the firm was notorious for its raucous Christmas parties. The last was crashed by Robin Williams, who groped a Toronto woman on the dance floor with all the grace of a frat boy at a keg party. (YP decided things had gotten a bit out of hand, and put the parties on hold.)

Sternlicht worries that the firm's success could jeopardize its originality. "The only problem with YP these days is that they're doing a lot of work," he says, "and for people like myself, we don't want to walk into a hotel and say, 'Oh, that's a Yabu.' I was in a Sofitel in Los Angeles, and I said, 'Oh, it's Yabu.' I mean, you know it's Yabu. It's kind of like a Bill Blass suit: you can tell from the nature of the design, the tightness." But moderation—in work, success, happiness—has never been a YP strong suit.

This past September, they opened a vast showroom—their first—next to their Toronto headquarters on Booth Avenue. It not only features their own designs but also pieces from Parisian furniture designer Christophe Delcourt and reproductions of vintage Brazilian pieces. "People have said, 'Why would you design your own furniture? Why do you need to?'" says Pushelberg. "Well, we don't need to, but it could be a challenge. And why not? It makes life interesting."

"When you get too comfortable, you feel bored," Pushelberg continues. "A year ago, I thought we'd kind of hit the level of client we could get, and the fee, and I felt bored again. I said to George, 'Why don't we just retire. I'm kind of over it.'"

But Yabu wasn't ready to cash out and sail into the sunset.

"OK," Pushelberg agreed. "Then let's keep pushing it."

**GOING TO THE CHAPEL** \* The way Club Monaco introduced a new retail experience to the Canadian market, The Hazelton has brought a heightened level of luxury to the hotel scene. "Materials are richer than what Toronto is used to," says Yabu. "There's a lot of high contrast in the palette, and lots of texture and interesting finishes." The hotel's \$130-million price tag is evident in hallways inlaid with mother of pearl, floors of Pakistani marble, handmade light fixtures and a sexy metallic colour scheme. Walls are panelled in cowhide, stone or suede, and trimmed in African walnut. YP's goal was a surplus of "wow moments."

Just down the street, Toronto's new YP-designed Four Seasons is expected to start construction in early 2008. And Yabu and Pushelberg are hoping one day to design a third hotel in their hometown: maybe a W or a 1 Hotel. "We want to have three," Pushelberg says excitedly, as if he were talking about adopting children.

But before completing this triumvirate, YP will renovate the wedding chapel at city hall—a charitable donation. They had initially wanted to renovate a local school, but the Toronto District School Board turned them down. The mayor's office suggested they revamp the city's decrepit chapel instead. Inspired by the legalization of gay marriage and the number of gay weddings booked at city hall, they leaped at the chance.

"It'll be fun!" says Pushelberg. "It's a really nasty room."

"It could be the symbol of a creative city," says Yabu.

"It'll be all about love," Pushelberg decides.

They're besotted with the idea.

Despite their talk of Toronto the Boring, Yabu and Pushelberg's hedonism wouldn't permit squandering time in a place they sincerely disliked. Toronto, to them, may best serve as a comfortable, reliable base from which to escape—a giant hotel. From here, they go in search of the next wow moment, the next property to buy or build, the next bottle of chablis.

END