

Firm: Paletteur
Interview: Mandy Ma, Interior Designer- Interviewed by Jeremy Bitter
(New!) Location: The Mission District, San Francisco
Size of firm: 6

History:

Gino Castano started his design firm independently in 2011, and in 2013, he joined forces with new business partner David Lasker (previously at BAMO) to form Paletteur.

Structure:

Gino Castano and David Lasker, principals focusing respectively on FF&E and Interior Architecture, and their staff of designers work on a variety of projects independently or together based project needs.

What makes your firm special?

“One thing that makes us special is that we’re not limited to a certain stylistic language. A lot of other firms have a look... you hire that firm for that style. If you look at the work that Paletteur has done a big jump would be between Four Seasons Lanai to Hotel Monaco DC. From something that is tonal and natural to something that is very pop-acid and neoclassical. I think that’s exciting for us designers who work there that we get to work in a number of stylistic languages, and that makes us stand out in the industry.”

Any styles that don’t work for Paletteur?

“I don’t think so, I think design supersedes style. And good design is different than style. Style is a taste or a personal choice, whereas design is what we aim for. You could say you like some styles personally or not; the style is determined by the client or owner, it is our job to deliver that style within the design standards and design knowledge we have.”

What was your biggest design challenge your firm has worked on?

“The Four Seasons Lanai project was very challenging on several levels. One was the timeline in which it had to be designed, I think 8 weeks or so. I joined the firm to expedite that process. It’s an extremely large project [with] guestroom suites, lobby, restaurants, across a lot of different types, corridors, everything. So [the] timeline across many types is kind of standard but working Lanai is a much more isolated site, so just simply shipping things there, getting things from the docks to the hotel; it was a challenge all around, not common to the mainland or even the other larger islands in Hawaii.”

How did you take on such a big challenge? What made it work?

“Everyone pitches in; you do what need to get done. It’s not about this is my title, this is what I do or I don’t. There’s fluidity; when one person passes something on to me, I need to understand the context of their request. So one of the first things I did was design throw pillows for the Four Seasons suites. “You don’t design pillows in a vacuum: there are sofas they go on, each has a different fabric in all of the suites. You have to understand the context that you’re working. That’s the kind of person you hire, they can’t be spoon fed to you, you need to know which questions to ask, and where to look for those answers.”

Paletteur takes a bit of a residential approach in design, away from typical “cookie cutter” guestroom design, how do you do it?

“If we can do something special, we’ll try to do so. People don’t hire us for the cookie cutter look. But if you’re looking for another layer or two, another level, I think that’s what we can provide. We all have

residential experience in the company, so we all know what can be done. It's a matter of taking that experience and bringing it into hospitality within its limitations, pushing the envelope a little but understanding how things are built, knowing where we can push and where we can't."

How would you describe Paletteur's culture in a nutshell?

"It's fun and it's fast! We have a lot of projects going on, a lot of deadlines, a lot of demands. It's fun, it's loose, it's exciting."

Where does your firm find it's inspiration?

"Everywhere. Gino, for example, attends trade shows all over the world, He finds vendors, sources and materials... sometimes they don't come to you necessarily."

"Both David, Gino and even myself, we travel. Wherever we go we take photographs of building details; that can be exotic locations abroad, or even walking around San Francisco. We all have cell phones so it's easy enough to snap a photo and bring it back to the office. Print media- for myself personally. I've done the whole online media Pinterest thing, I'm over it, I prefer print."

"When we start a project we want to start with the location and the specifics of it. If we're in Lanai, we should be inspired by Hawaii and we should be inspired by the artists and craftspeople there. If we're in DC, we should be inspired by the hundreds of historical buildings. We can travel far and wide, but it's nice to have that anchor for all of your projects."

What's your favorite project, and why?

"I love the Hotel Monaco DC. It's neoclassical on acid, it's super fun; so oftentimes your projects are about restraint, and this one was nice to let go: print on print on print, primary colors on bright bold colors. It's a historic building, it's a beautiful envelope to work within. A wonderful hotel, wonderful staff, overall a very enjoyable project."

[Hotel Monaco is] "a landmark property in Washington DC, built in two phases by two architects. Design wise it was a real challenge, you can see where the two buildings join. It's not obvious to the untrained eye. But if you look at ceiling moldings, suddenly these... [transitions] change your wallcovering design, sconce placement, etc. It was previously various government institutions, at one time it was the tax building. As a historic building, there are certain things we are able to do. We can't just drill into the columns, and could only drill holes in the walls of a certain size. Each and every one of the guest rooms differs. These were peoples' offices, restrooms for each of the guest rooms were added later. It changes room by room, a lot of doors were sealed up. Moldings and casework were left over from the original buildings. I think it's a wonderful space, but very challenging to design in when the rooms vary."

Any words of wisdom or quotes to live by?

"My personal motto is from Zoolander, as Hansel says, 'I grip it and and I rip it.' [...] If you're going to do something, you should go all the way, why be tentative, why be half-way? Design is fun, design is exciting, we don't need to be apologetic. Why not push the envelope? You can discover more things that way and it's more exciting as a designer when you don't repeat the same things you've done."

"We don't like to repeat ourselves." How do you expanding on the basic needs we see in every hotel guest room or public space over and over again?

"You have certain vendors you develop relationships with over time, and they become your bread and butter. When you need that stool, you know Restoration Hardware has a bench "like this", I need a light

fixture but I don't want a custom piece, we might go to Visual Comfort. Sometimes we'd take that sconce from Visual Comfort and have a custom shade made. You can often add on one extra step to a retail or catalog piece. You don't want to overthink everything, not everything needs to be *special* and custom. So you find that balance, and you see where the time, money and effort should be put. Not every design element is the lead, they are often in supporting roles. This way we're not starting over on each piece."

Favorite lunch spot?

"We love Cafe St. Jorge. The coffee, the smoothies, they have nice little baked treats. Some people go to Cafe St. Jorge everyday; I try to limit it to twice a week. It's a great spot."

Favorite Bar or Happy Hour?

"We often have happy hour in house! Someone picks a drink, we go out and buy the components, and shake it up at the office. Most often you'll find us in the office celebrating, instead of out."