

MARIYA NAUMOV & GIANPIERO PUGLIESE

Enriching The Lives of People by Creating Beautiful Places

| BY HELÉNE RAMACKERS

Husband and wife team Mariya Naumov and Gianpiero Pugliese heading up international design and architecture firm Audax spoke exclusively with Upscale Living magazine about creating meaningful spaces for their clients.

Mariya and Gianpiero, tell us a bit about yourselves.

Gianpiero: I've always been drawn to design and architecture to shape how people experience the world around them. I studied architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, and later earned my Master of Architecture at Harvard University. A formative chapter for me was my study abroad experience at IUAV in Venice, Italy, where I was able to further immerse myself in Europe's rich architectural history and connect more deeply with my Italian heritage. That experience reinforced my lifelong respect for the enduring principles of classical architecture - principles that enable us to create spaces that inspire and uplift, and that reflect our commitment to restoring the true essence of beauty in the built environment.

Mariya: My path has always been rooted in art and design. I completed a Bachelor of Arts in Art History at the University of Toronto and later earned my Bachelor of Interior Design from Toronto Metropolitan University. My time working in galleries and my personal practice as a painter

gave me a deep appreciation for artistic principles, materiality, and composition. Those early experiences continue to shape my approach to creating interiors that feel rich, layered, and meaningful.

Did you have an influence in your youth that shaped your career path?

Gianpiero: Absolutely. My time in Venice was a turning point. Being surrounded by the city's architectural heritage deepened my appreciation for balance, proportion, and history in design. It gave me an awareness of the responsibility architects have to honor the past while building for the future.

Mariya: For me, it was art. Studying art history and painting gave me an instinctive understanding of color, light, and composition. Those influences continue to guide how I approach interiors, ensuring that every space I create feels both timeless and personal.

When did you start your firm, Audax?

Both: Audax was founded in 2007 and the firm evolved to bring together architec-

ture, interiors, and construction under one umbrella. From the beginning, our vision was to embrace the historic model of the "architect as master builder," ensuring every project could be seamlessly executed from concept to completion.

What and who inspires you?

Both: We're inspired by history and by the principles that have shaped great architecture across time, such as symmetry, proportion, and materiality. At the same time, we're energized by our clients, who trust us to interpret their vision and bring it to life. Inspiration also comes from travel, art, and design across cultures.

What is the favorite part of your job?

Gianpiero: I get to spend every day working with my wife - that's pretty special. But beyond that, there's nothing quite like the moment when we photograph a finished project. To see something that started as a simple sketch on a blank page come to life - to walk through a space that was once just an idea - is incredibly rewarding. Watching both the architecture



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and interiors materialize exactly as we envisioned them is one of the most satisfying parts of what we do.

Mariya: For me, design always begins as a kind of daydream. I love creating a story - imagining the ideal living environment and then bringing that vision to life. In many ways, it feels like developing a film: it starts as a fantasy, and through collaboration and creativity, becomes something real. The best part is seeing our clients' dreams for their homes come true.

Gianpiero, how do you go about navigating change in your line of work, eg. 3-D modeling, or do you embrace it?

Gianpiero: We've always embraced change - you have to. Technology evolves so quickly, and if you don't move with it, you fall behind. From the very beginning, we've been committed to staying current with the latest tools and innovations, always looking for ways to make our work more productive and efficient.

Most technology is good; it expands what's possible and enhances creativity. But I've always believed that new tools should complement, not replace, the traditional ones. Even with all the advances in AI and digital modeling, we still start every project with a pen and a blank sheet of paper. There's something essential about that human connection to drawing - technology can build on it, but it should never erase it.

And the use of technology in architecture, has that improved the way you fashion structures?

Gianpiero: Yes, in many ways. One of the most exciting areas of advancement has been in materials. Take interior design, for example - kitchen countertops used to be primarily stone or granite, but now we're seeing incredible innovations with man-made materials like large-format porcelain slabs. These materials are constantly evolving, offering new properties, finishes, and applications that expand what's possible in both design and durability.

That said, much of how we build still relies on the same craftsmanship and techniques that have been used for decades. So, while technology continues to move us forward, the essence of good architecture - thoughtful design, solid construction, and beauty that endures - remains unchanged.

Mariya, you are an avid painter. How has that paved the way for your expertise in creating amazing interiors?

Mariya: Painting taught me to see the world differently - to notice the subtleties of color, the



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and textures evolve from there.

For our own home, for instance, I drew inspiration from Vermeer's paintings - the soft, muted tones, the way light moves across surfaces, and the quiet beauty of old-world living. I literally extracted colors from his works to shape our palette. But for a more contemporary project, I might take an entirely different direction. It always starts with the narrative and what best expresses the spirit of the space.

Please tell us about Human Architecture.

Both: Our philosophy of Human Architecture emerged from our recognition that today's built environments all too often overlook the importance of beauty. Modern cities, buildings, and interiors frequently emphasize functionality and efficiency at the expense of aesthetic appeal. This shift, which began with the modern movement, has resulted in the unremarkable environments we encounter today.

Human Architecture is our deliberate response to this trend. Our goal is to restore the enduring principles of design that have historically ensured beauty. These principles, or axioms, include symmetry, proportion, repetition, hierarchy, materiality, and the emotive qualities that resonate deeply with our physical human nature. Our innate appreciation for balance, rhythm, and harmony is rooted in how we perceive and interact with the world. By embracing these timeless principles, we strive to create contemporary spaces that are both aesthetically pleasing and deeply meaningful. We hold that beauty is objective and not merely a matter of personal opinion.

Our approach involves a thorough study of historical architecture and design, drawing lessons from the past to inform our contemporary practice. This historical insight allows us to craft modern designs that are rich in character and timeless in their elegance. Rather than adhering to a single style, we use our Human Architecture philosophy to guide a variety of design styles, ensuring that each project is uniquely suited to its context while maintaining the core principles of beauty and harmony. This approach enables us to create spaces that inspire and uplift, reflecting our commitment to restoring the true essence of beauty in the built environment.

You have done some exquisite projects. Has there been a favorite?

Both: It's difficult to choose because every project we take on is unique - from luxury residential homes and multi-unit developments to exclusive commercial spaces, prestigious hos-



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way light interacts with surfaces, and how textures and tones can create mood. That sensitivity translates directly into interior design. When I'm creating a space, I think of it as a canvas: the composition of materials, textures, and forms must harmonize to create something timeless and emotionally resonant.

Do you have a specific color palette you favor? And textures?

Mariya: Not really - I know some designers have a defined palette or signature style, but what sets us apart is that we don't limit ourselves to one look. Our projects can be modern or traditional, depending on the story we're trying to tell. Every design begins with that initial dream or fantasy we want to bring to life, and the color palette



pitality venues, and even religious buildings. That said, Villa Cortile in Toronto is a project that stands out because it perfectly embodies our philosophy of Human Architecture. Inspired by Italian design traditions, it combines symmetry, proportion, and material richness with contemporary innovation, creating a home that feels both timeless and deeply connected to its context.

It would also be remiss not to mention our own home, which has been a personal and ongoing project. Most recently, we completed our kitchen, which was inspired by Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*. It's a space where history, art, and contemporary living come together - a painterly composition of light, materiality, and craftsmanship. It's also where we spend the most time as a family, which makes it especially

meaningful.

How hands-on are you with each project?

Both: Extremely hands-on. We built Audax intentionally so that we could manage architecture, interiors, and construction together. This integrated approach allows us to maintain quality and accountability at every stage. We're involved from the earliest sketches to the final



finishes, ensuring that every detail reflects our vision and our client's needs.

Have there been projects you declined? If yes, why?

Both: Yes, we have. The relationship between us and our clients is absolutely essential. For a project to be successful, there has to be trust, mutual understanding, and shared values. If we sense that alignment isn't there - whether in vision, priorities, or approach - it's better for everyone to step back.

Trust is the foundation of every project we take on. Without it, the process can't thrive. We also look for clients who share our belief in what design can do - as our mission states, "enriching the lives of people by creating beautiful places." We want to work with people who value creating spaces that are not only beautiful and timeless, but also deeply meaningful and designed to enhance everyday life.

Running a business as husband and wife sounds amazing, but when do you switch off or close the proverbial office door? Or is it advantageous to have a sounding board?

Both: Audax is more than a business - it's our way of life. We live and breathe design, and our home in Toronto is directly connected to our studio, much like many businesses in Europe. We don't draw a line between work and home, but in a way that feels natural for us. We see this as advantageous because we're constantly a sounding board for each other, and our shared passion for design enriches both our work and our family life.

How do you balance what I can only imagine is a demanding career and raising three children?

Both: Balance is always a work in progress, but our children are an integral part of our lives, just as much as Audax is. We make it a priority to be present with them, and we often draw inspiration from the life we share together as a family. Ultimately, our work is about creating spaces that enhance life, and our children remind us every day what that truly means.

What do you do for fun?

Mariya: I love to read - mostly history books - ideally with a good cup of coffee in hand. It's my quiet escape and a way to keep learning and finding inspiration.

Gianpiero: For me, travel is the ultimate way to unwind. I love exploring new places, taking in the architecture, and of course, finding time to

just relax somewhere beautiful.

Exciting plans on the horizon?

Both: We're thrilled to be entering a new chapter with Audax - we've just opened our first U.S. office in Palm Beach, Florida. It's an exciting step in expanding our practice internationally and allows us to bring our Human Architecture philosophy to South Florida's dynamic luxury market.

Palm Beach is a natural fit for us, given its vibrant design culture and its international community. Having a local office means we can be more present for our clients, strengthening relationships and ensuring we remain hands-on throughout every stage of a project.

We've already begun work on a residential project in the Bahamas and have several South Florida projects in progress. Our vision is to establish a meaningful body of work in Palm Beach and across the southeastern U.S., while continuing to push boundaries with projects that are timeless, elegant, and deeply connected to the people who live in them.❖

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