

THE RADAR DESIGN

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BUILDING BRIDGES: Ali Honarkar and Mustafa Nouri connect their nomadic past to DC's present.

THE RIGHT ANGLE *Division 1's fierce designers give DC a mod punch*

You may not have heard of Ali Honarkar and Mustafa Nouri, but you're about to. *The New York Times* handed the DC architects the distinction of single-handedly kicking off the revitalization of Shaw, yet they still fly under the radar in an indie rock star kind of way. This spring, the duo's latest project, The Lacey, comes online and will undoubtedly stand out from the rest of the U Street corridor's condo clutter.

The striking 26-unit building is sharply clad in glass and concrete—no surprise there—but it clearly differentiates itself from the rest of the neighborhood's attempts at cutting-edge design by stacking linear boxes atop one another Piet Mondrian-style. Each condo is customizable on a daily basis, as the modernist pied-à-terres come complete with moveable glass partitioned walls. The common spaces, bridges and walkways interlacing each unit give the structure a *Matrix* ethos.

So do these two rising starchitects have a Neo complex? Perhaps. Rebuilding their world is what got them started. Born in Afghanistan, Nouri's family moved to Saudi Arabia. As an 11-year-old, he watched video clips of his homeland being destroyed by war. "Those painful images left a mark," he says. Once he moved stateside he dedicated himself to urban renewal with the hope of bringing lessons back to the region that cemented his vision of what architecture should be. "I grew up in the Karte-She neighborhood of Kabul," says Nouri. "The design was influenced by Bauhaus modernism: Houses were elegant, simple and sophisticated."

Honarkar, the son of a developer, and Nouri share an aesthetic best described as extravagant minimalism. Like Nouri, Honarkar gives his birthplace credit for his avant-garde vision. Recollections of urban Iran are incorporated into his work, along with inspirations from fashion designers such as Surface to Air, Paul Smith and John Varvatos.

The pair met as undergrads at the University of Maryland in 1990 and began collaborating. "We thought big and wanted to make a difference," Honarkar says. "Our goal was always to bring modern to DC. At Maryland, our ideas stood out and we had to defend everything we designed."

Turns out that the partners, who named their firm for U2's hit "One," never stopped having to justify their work. After Division 1's inception, their increasingly edgy forms were met with reluctance from developers. "We'd put something on paper and show it to builders who'd freak out, thinking they wouldn't be able to execute the plan," Nouri says. "Out of necessity, we had to build the structures ourselves."

The edgy pioneers worked hard to actualize their sometimes-outlandish ideas. And they continue to push the boundaries of what can be done, as seen in their Web site's electronic sketchbook filled with bleeding-edge renderings for an angular green bus shelter inspired by a dragonfly, a futuristic steel desert pod and a twig-like Victims of War Memorial, conceptualized for an exhibition at the National Building Museum.

Beyond these sketches, Division 1's forward-thinking fabrications are more than mere dreams. "I'm not interested in falling into a type of bracket," Nouri says. "We build structures that we feel are appropriate for contemporary living, always with respect for context. Stylistically our structures might be different, but that's not our primary intention."

This summer, a blonde timber-and-glass-façaded condo building called The Drost will place another jewel in the architects' Shaw crown. Returning to the neighborhood that provided their big break, Nouri and Honarkar are pulling out all the stops. The zoning requirements forced them to build high rather than deep, leaving their latest design with a skinny silhouette unlike anything they've ever realized before.

With plans to launch a furniture line by the end of the year, the peripatetic partners behind Division 1 show no signs of slowing down. "We're going to stick to what we know," Honarkar says. "We care a lot about our clients, but we're not going to change just so we can appeal to a larger market. DC needs people who can do modern well, and we're here for that challenge. We feel like there's a greater cause." ■

For more information, go to www.division1architects.com.