

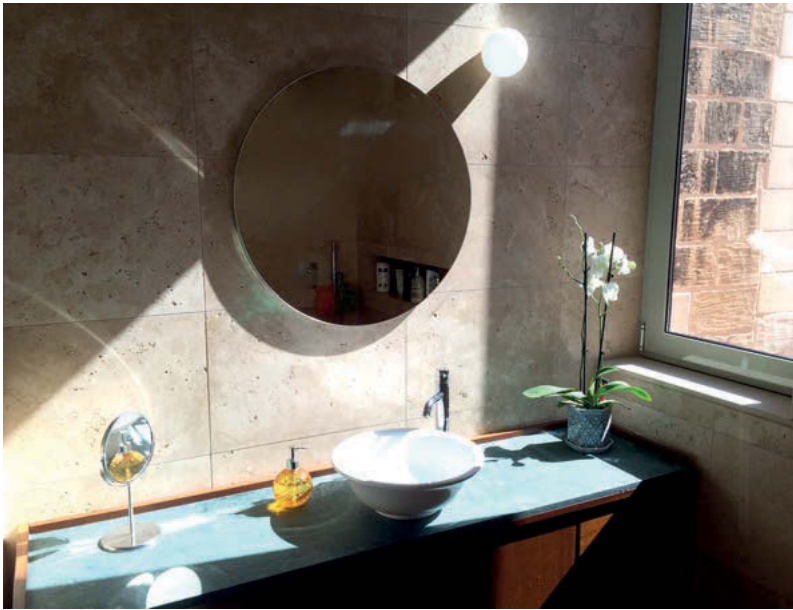
BREAKING THE PROVERBIAL GLASS CEILING

KATJA ABELA CASSAR AND PAULA AGIUS VADALA HAVE SEEN THEIR AWARD-WINNING ARCHITECTURE BOUTIQUE GROW EXPONENTIALLY IN JUST UNDER THREE YEARS. HERE, THEY SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCE OF BREAKING GENDER EXPECTATIONS WITHIN THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD.



Paula Agius Vadala and
Katja Abela Cassar.

Worst is when we are called '*pupa*' or '*qalbi*', though we try to make a non-issue out of it



In the space of less than three years, you can say that Katja Abela Cassar and Paula Agius Vadala have more than proven themselves to be a dynamic duo, rising up the ranks of their architecture business from a one-roomed office in Sliema, followed by a short stint occupying slightly larger premises in Attard and, currently, making the last minute arrangements prior to their move to larger offices in Siġġiewi, shortly after winning the Young Architect of the Year Award last year.

Katja and Paula became acquainted some six years ago when both were reading architecture at University. Since Katja was one year ahead of Paula, their paths only crossed briefly just enough to make them aware of each other's existence. Fast forward a few years and Paula joined the architectural firm Katja had been working at for a year and a half. They hit it off immediately – started chatting, and haven't stopped since! – “that was all work-related of course,” quipped Paula!

Talking to the two women, it comes across very clearly that architecture was the profession they were destined to head towards, having had a serious desire from an early age, to create spaces that combine functionality with harmony.

“Architecture was a profession that captured my imagination and interest from a very young age. I always knew that my career path would lead me towards design. I would spirit away the interior design magazines my parents bought, spending hours on end looking at every detail and concept in awe and dreaming of one day creating similar spaces myself. It always made sense to me that the architecture of a space, together with its interior should work in harmony together,” says Paula.

“My father was a big influence in my career choice. Apart from being an engineer by profession he is also an artist, who has throughout the years created some very

beautiful paintings – this inspired me to want to combine the two forms – creating a functional space that yet looks beautiful too. Becoming an architect was an obvious choice,” Katja adds.

Being an all-female architectural practice, the conversation inevitably takes a direction towards gender equality in the industry. Though they have been lucky and haven't had any serious episodes with any of the workers they hire with, they do encounter some resistance from men who do not take kindly to receiving instructions from the opposite sex.

If commissioned work is not produced to satisfaction and has to be redone, a frequent accusation they are subjected to is that they are “over-reacting” – a term that their male counterparts do not have to put up with. “Worst is when we are called ‘pupa’ or ‘qalbi’, though we try to make a non-issue out of it,” Paula smiles wryly.

Despite this, their gender is something they have turned to their advantage. Both women feel that their gender gives them that innate ability to encourage clients to open up in a way that they get a better understanding of the clients' expectations. And, of course, the decision to set up shop was a dream for both.

“It all started when, one day, Katja voiced her thoughts about setting up her own practice. Seeing how well we always worked together, having both the same values and ambitions, it made sense to team up and take the plunge,” explained Paula.

Although they were working on some very interesting projects, Katja and Paula felt the time was right. Leaving the security of their jobs and handing in their resignation was not an easy task but nearly three years down the line, they have not looked back! ►



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Choosing the name of what was going to be their identity was the next step. “We wanted to come up with a name that would not be just another architectural practice, but a brand that could also evolve into a design brand,” enthused Katja. “It had to be short, memorable, something simple but clearly defines what it was going to be all about”.

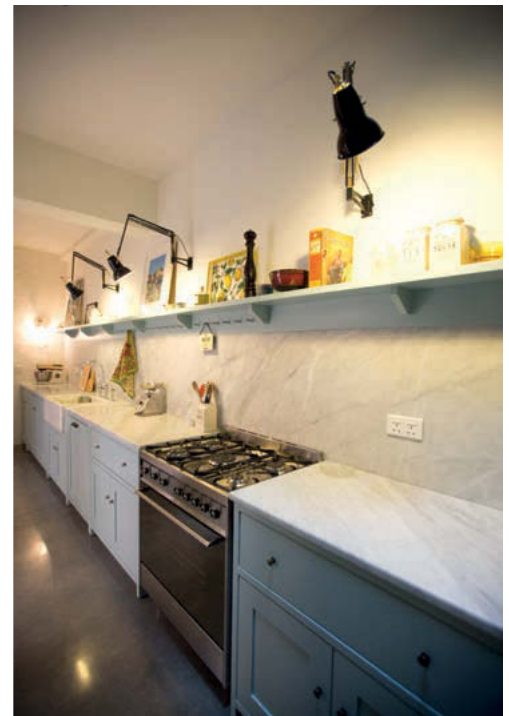
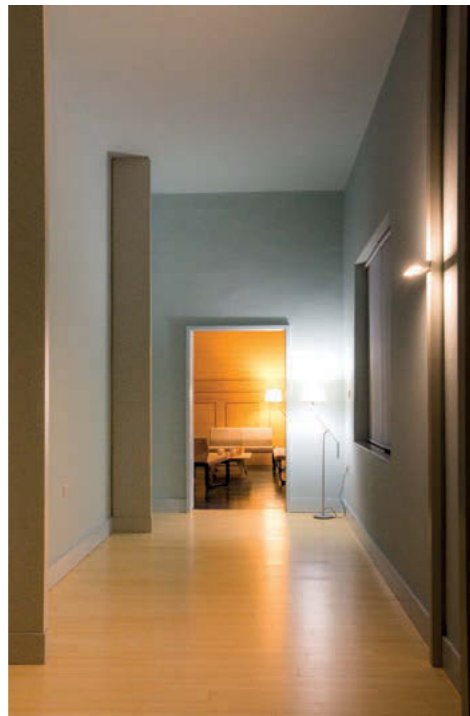
Over a lunch break, Japanese and French words and phrases kept cropping up. Their quick creative minds led to Katja saying ‘Maison’ – meaning house and home. Paula added ‘Atelier’ – being a studio or workshop used by an artist or designer – to the mix. A quick swap of words and Atelier Maison was founded.

“Atelier Maison had a good ring to it and, more importantly, made sense for the kind of practice we wanted to create. We chose our logo using a handwritten font on a classic blue background. Blue

being one of the most universally-preferred colour, by those wishing to convey reliability, trustworthiness and communication – three words the encompass our work ethic,” recalled Paula

Atelier Maison’s first week of work consisted of preparing and working on a photoshoot of Katja’s place in Dingli. This was a perfect way of showcasing their work which was eventually featured in one of the local architectural magazines. This led to the first enquiries which then evolved into new projects.

Although a young outfit, they still have managed to build an interesting portfolio of projects, needless to say there are always some favourites and to date the renovation of an executive floor is the project they are most satisfied with. “The client respected our vision and it turned out exactly how we wanted” said Katja. Their efforts on this project won them the coveted Young Architect of 2016 Award.





When asked as to whether there any particular aspects of their background and upbringing that shaped their design principles and philosophies, both agreed that Arch. Lino Bianco and Arch. Joe Galea, two of their University tutors, were a big influence on their approach to design and detailing.

“The first few years of work experience can shape the kind of architect you become and we were lucky enough to work in a practice where design and detailing were an integral part of the process, giving us experience in the area” reminisced Paula. “While we were both always interested in these aspects, going out into the working world teaches you to produce things that are both practical and beautiful. So, you have to discipline yourself and think about the more practical things and how they are going to be manufactured”.

Katja and Paula draw their inspiration from Louis Kahn, *one of the greatest 20th century US architects, known for combining Modernism with the weight and dignity of ancient monuments.*



“We love the way he uses materials with light.”

Luis Barragán, *Mexico’s revolutionary architect, known for his emphasis on colour, light, shadow, form and texture, is another inspiration, for the way he introduces colour to his materials with colour.* Both iconic architects produced spaces that were warm, welcoming, and earthy, and their work is very tactile and relatable, which makes one feel the materials used by just looking at them. “This is something that we strive to achieve,” underlined Katja.

“When shaping a project, we work towards producing spaces that bestow a feel good factor, this is achieved by means of a thorough understanding of materials, light and colour. Colour affects the mood of a space. The level of detail we go into

also contributes to the overall function of the space” emphasized Paula.

In an era where computer generated imagery and visualisations have taken over, one wonders whether there is still a place for model making or sketching designs by hand, Katja explains that “When we begin working on a design proposal, the first thing we do is grab a pen and paper and we begin sketching. It helps with getting a feel for the project and the space you are dealing with. Unsurprisingly, a lot of clients still ask for computer generated visuals, which of course also play an important part of the process, yet sketching can be just as, if not more effective”.

So, what is next for these young sassy ladies? “It is in our nature, that when designing, we go into a lot of detail and more often than not end up custom making a lot of the furniture of an interior. It would be exciting to get into furniture design and product design one day,” mused Katja.

Given the combination of zest and determination the duo possesses, this last goal does not seem far-fetched at all. **■**

