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Sister Act

text: Nicholas Acquoff

With a focus on “shared space”, new design studio Amber Road is already making its mark in and around Sydney.

Recycled Saki Bottles were used to create a stunning feature wall at Melbourne restaurant, Kobe Jones. **opposite page** Sisters Yasmine Ghoniem (left) and Katy Svalbe, before the launch of Amber Road last month.

It's a warm Friday morning in Sydney and people are streaming past Gnome Café on Crown Street, Surry Hills, on the way to work. Katy Svalbe and Yasmine Ghoniem are sitting at one of the outside tables when I arrive, looking a little relieved, and somewhat relaxed, in contrast to the passing traffic. Last night was the launch of Amber Road, the design company that half-sisters Svalbe and Ghoniem have dreamed about creating for more than a decade: a concept that started on the back of a postcard, when they were living on opposite sides of the world.

The launch was held at a friend's loading dock in Chippendale, and Svalbe says the final touches were pretty hands-on. "We spent the entire time there last week, on our hands and knees, scrubbing the floor and repainting it," she laughs. "And now we have to give it back."

Being the older sister, 36-year-old Svalbe takes control of the conversation when asked about their complicated family history. She laughs and immediately turns to her sister. "Our mother has exotic taste in men. We've probably only spent four years of our whole life together, which was here in Sydney when we were young," she laughs, taking out her laptop and bringing up a family timeline.

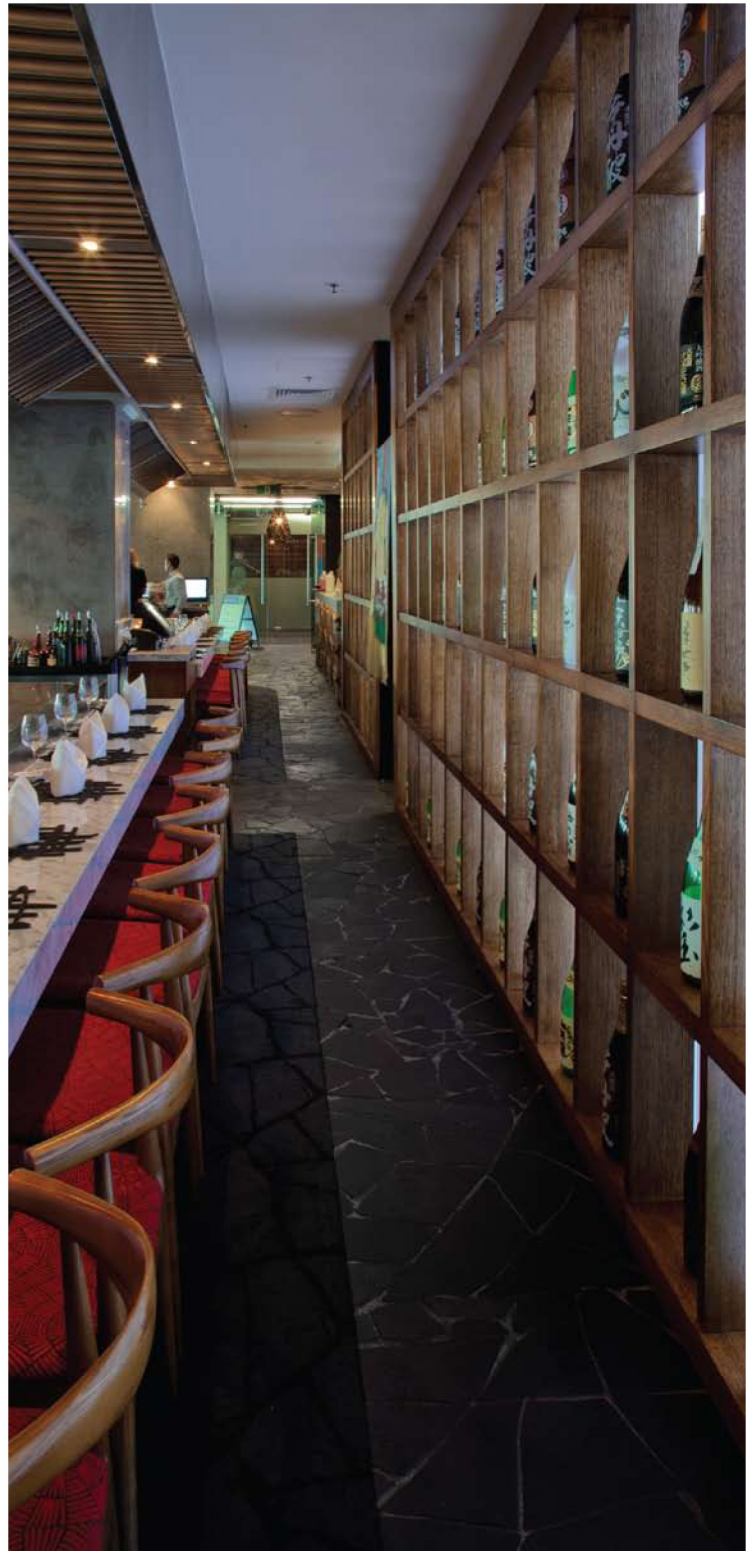
At the same time that Svalbe studied landscape architecture in Perth, Ghoniem moved with her mother to Kuwait. It was 1999 and Ghoniem was just ten years old. Over the course of a decade, Svalbe finished her degree and moved from Perth back to Sydney to work at Hassell. "I got the experience of working on some huge projects," she says, while pouring tea into her sister's cup. "I worked on the Millennium Parklands around the Olympic Village. After that I went to Aspect Studios, and I've been working on and off with them for ten years."

In 2003, she took some time off work to travel and finally reconnected with her younger sister. "Yasmine had left the Middle East by then. She was in Savannah, Georgia, studying interior design. That's when we first said we would love to do something together."

Amber Road is a landscape architecture and interior design company, founded on a simple design philosophy: Svalbe and Ghoniem create functional, sustainable spaces that challenge historical norms and encourage collaboration. One of their principle concerns is with shared space and, since 2011, they've given new life to a host of languishing sites around Sydney.

Boasting an incredibly diverse range of experience, Svalbe and Ghoniem have delivered landscapes and interiors for boutique hotels, cafés, shops, urban parks, public spaces, restaurants, schools and houses all over the world.

Ghoniem, who is now 31, explains that creating Amber Road has given them an opportunity to focus on their shared vision. "We started our company so we could make the company work for us. We had a vision of bringing our skills together in projects," she says. "We want to work with spaces that have multi uses and multi occupants. We question in this day and age whether the conventional way of being shut in a little box with your partner really works." →



Profile

top left 'Care Park': Svalbe's installation at the 2004 Future Garden Exhibition in Sydney, while working with Aspect Studios. **bottom left** 'Bio-Tech-Tastic': Svalbe's entry into the Bilbao Jardin competition, 2009. **top right** The public precinct in Madrid, Spain, where Svalbe honed her technique for sustainable soil profiles. **bottom right** One of Amber Road's first designs: the reception area at Snap Fitness Gym in Sydney, which uses birch ply on almost every surface.



As Svalbe explains towards the end of our conversation, Amber Road projects are always focused on sustainability. While working in Madrid, she learned an ingenious technique for capturing water and filtering it through soil profiles – a technique which she has put to use here at home. "We used the system in Charlie's Garden in Redfern, and on another project in Beaconsfield," she says. "You always need to create closed cycle systems. You need to capture the sun and water on site, and reuse them as many times as you can so that it's all a self-contained organism. That is what drives most of our landscape projects – they can be beautiful, but underneath it all you're working within an ecological framework."

Since returning to Sydney, Svalbe and Ghoniem have designed interiors for a range of sites, including Snap Fitness Gym – an American franchise that recently opened in Sydney – Kobe Jones restaurant in Melbourne, and a tired public space behind Parramatta train station. In Parramatta, they tried to re-invent boring conventional spaces by using bright colours and building seats and tables in under-utilised public parks and steps.

Before heading back to their studio in Wollstonecraft for day one of Amber Road, Svalbe tells me about their newest concept, "With or Without You". It's a daring vision in which they aim to redefine apartment living. "It's about the idea of sharing, really. I mean, here we are in our thirties and we can't even afford to buy a home for ourselves. But imagine if you could have a central courtyard to socialise in with your neighbours, and your own private space out the back," she says, turning to her sister again.

"That's right," laughs Ghoniem. "We're just trying to transform the world."

AmberRoadDesign.com.au

