



From humble beginnings in a Brooklyn basement office, Renée Cooley and Emily Monaco have launched an international lighting design practice.

THE DYNAMIC DUO

BY VILMA BARR

This was no ordinary Brooklyn basement; it was once the lower-level office in a brownstone occupied by renowned lighting designer Peter Barna. Under his tutelage, that space became the launch pad for two of

To underscore the organic ingredients employed at the Amore Pacific skincare salon in Manhattan, design firm Yabu Pushelberg simulated natural elements in the architecture. Cooley Monaco Studio created a complementary lighting plan for the award-winning project.

the industry's top female talents. Most surprisingly, neither principal of Cooley Monaco Studio (CoMoS) had an interest in lighting as a career opportunity before their paths intersected in Manhattan during the early 1990s.

The firm has since expanded to serve a worldwide roster of notable retail, hospitality, commercial, and residential clients such as Gucci, Tiffany & Co., Judith Leiber, Marc Jacobs, Citibank, Le Meridien Hotel in Minneapolis, the Four Seasons in Tokyo, the Hard Rock Hotel® and China Grill in Chicago, Dos

Caminos in New York City, plus many single- and multi-family residences.

In addition, Cooley and Monaco have collaborated with well-respected architectural and interior design firms like Yabu Pushelberg, Fox & Fowle, SOM, Gensler, Maya Lin with David Hotson, Robert A.M. Stern, S. Russell Groves, and Studio Sofield.

CoMoS is also a certified Women in Business (WBE) enterprise that participates in the NYSERDA Small Commercial Lighting (Energy Smart) program. After attaining much acclaim



The changing area and massage rooms at this Amore Pacific spa continue the theme of soft, soothing lighting.

in the trade, it's hard to imagine that lighting design wasn't in their master plans all along.

From Finance to Lighting

"I came to New York to practice photography and to be an artist," Cooley recalls. "I wasn't looking for a career." By that point, she had a business degree from the University of Miami and held a job in finance. That all changed when she decided to go back to school for a bachelor's degree in fine art from Florida International University in Miami. After earning her BFA, she worked at a Miami art gallery for five years before switching her focus to photography. This newly discovered passion led her to pursue

a master of fine arts (MFA) from Yale University.

Her goal in relocating to Manhattan was "to live, get a job, and photograph," Cooley states. "I answered an ad in the newspaper for a position that wouldn't get in the way of my art work. It was for an administrative assistant in a lighting design firm called Light & Space Associates." She got the job and served under lighting designer Peter Barna, whose company was based out of his brownstone on Vanderbilt Avenue in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn.

"I lived a few blocks away so I could walk [there]. Peter was working on the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Hasbro headquarters in Pawtucket,



Renée Cooley and Emily Monato

Rhode Island. He got me started doing mock-ups. When I broke my hand and couldn't do the mock-ups, Peter said, 'Sit over there at the designer's table and we'll hire a temp for the administrative work.' He was doing a Herman Miller



For this Marc Jacobs Collection boutique, Stephan Jaklitsch Architects tapped the talent of the CoMoS duo for the lighting.

showroom on Madison Avenue for a Designer's Saturday, and said, 'Why don't you project-manage this?' That was the start of it," Cooley comments.

Since Barna is also a trained electrical engineer, he taught her basic lighting techniques. "Peter said, 'Try to envision a three-dimensional space on these drawings. Use yellow for the light and darker pencil for the shadows, and color in the elevation. Show me how you want it to look, and I'll show you how to do it.' What a way to learn! It became a career at that point. I was just taken by it. He [demonstrated] how different lamps worked to highlight the furniture and the effects we were looking for and [as a result], I started to learn about lamps, like the difference between a PAR 36 and 38."

Monato Takes Manhattan

"I had a degree in interior design from the University of Wisconsin," Monato recounts. "I never had a lighting course and never heard of a lighting designer. However, after deciding that I didn't

want to go into interiors, I called Fran Kellogg Smith, the author of one of my course textbooks. She had a kind-looking face on her book's dust jacket picture, and I needed advice!"

Kellogg Smith told her that the International Association of Lighting Designers (IALD) was offering summer internships in either New York or Los Angeles, and portfolios were due in a week. "I thought, 'What have I got to lose?' I put together a letter-size portfolio, filled out a one-page application, and mailed the envelope. I was fortunate to have been invited by Horton Lees Lighting Design in March, and I moved to New York in May," she recalls.

Monato decided to stay in the Big Apple after the summer program had ended. She remained at Horton Lees for two-and-one-half years, open to learning anything that anyone would teach her.

"I was given free reign of the mock-up room, library, and archives. I admired [the late] Jules Horton' design conviction, Stephen Lee's vast technical knowledge, and Barbara Cianci Horton's

ability to talk about light in a way that people could relate to it – which is no easy task with something so intangible. One weekend, as Barbara and I were leaving the office, I told her, 'I want to be like you.' She answered, 'You will be, in time.'"

Jules and Barbara took Monato under their wing, bringing her to performances at Carnegie Hall and the Bowery Lane Theatre and inviting her to accompany them to events to meet industry friends and acquaintances.

Then the economy changed as well as the office climate. "I thought I was going to move to California, but it didn't work out. David Mann, an architect client and friend, told me that Renée Cooley was starting her own practice," Monato explains. "I interviewed that week and started working with Renée the following Monday."

The Early Years

Cooley was contently working with Barna as a designer on the Hasbro account in 1991 when an irresistible



Working in tandem with design firm Yabu Pushelberg, CoMoS devised an elegant lighting aesthetic for the signature beauty section on the main floor of New York City's famed Bergdorf Goodman department store.

opportunity arose. Barna – who had previously taught at Fashion Institute of Technology and at Parsons – was approached to teach lighting full-time at Pratt Institute. (He is now provost at Pratt.). “Peter asked if I wanted to take over the practice, and that was the start of Renée Cooley Lighting Design,” she relates.

It wasn't long before clients started calling Cooley directly for projects such as exhibition lighting for the Liberty Science Center in Jersey City, Hasbro's 70,000-sq.-ft. second phase of construction, and the Jakarta Convention Center in Indonesia. “Large jobs were coming to me,” she comments. Then, David Mann of Fox & Fowle Architects [the firm in charge of the Jakarta project] said that he knew someone he thought I should meet, and that maybe she would want to work with me. That person was Emily, and we worked well from the beginning,” Cooley says.

Those collaborations with large architectural companies on overseas projects are what saw Renée Cooley Lighting Design through the 1991 recession. Work picked up the following year, and Cooley was able to relocate her Brooklyn-based practice to a 350-sq.-ft. space on Lafayette Street in Manhattan. In 1993, the two women became equal business partners.

“We were lean and humble and conservative, but we both understood where the practice could go,” Cooley says. Early on in project discussions, the designers direct the conversations to discover their clients' emotional points-of-view and reactions to the space that will be occupied.

“Every project needs inspiration from the clients,” Monato says. “It's our job to engage them, to tap into their repertoire of emotions, and their mental images. Our responsibility goes beyond the technical and financial numbers.

We have to be able to sell the concept and communicate our ideas. Once the clients understand those, we can move [forward].”

Monato points out that quick hand sketches can be produced at a meeting to express lighting ideas that help establish a framework of understanding. “Sometimes you can't just chat up an idea with a client,” she reveals. “You have to become part of their thought process.”

One of Monato's first responsibilities was the main floor of the upscale Takashimaya department store on Fifth Avenue with architects David Mann and Russell Groves. “We had three weeks and a tiny budget,” she recalls. “It was literally a back-of-the-napkin design, but it won a Lumen Award.” Their work was seen by Christine Nakaoka, the director/interiors for Bergdorf Goodman, who considered hiring Groves for the design of the new plaza-level cosmetics floor.



Minneapolis' Le Meridien hotel posed a bit of a challenge for Cooley and Monato when "value engineers" gutted their original lighting plan. The team brainstormed with Toronto-based agency TPL to restore cohesiveness to the design. Shown here are the lobby and the lounge.

Ultimately, the interior design firm of Yabu Pushelberg, who did their own lighting, was selected for the project.

Undeterred, Cooley and Monato set up a meeting with Yabu Pushelberg and successfully convinced the designers to give them a try. The result of this important commission was the creation of an award-winning design for this high-visibility space.

"It became our springboard to high-end retail," Monato states. The female design duo then worked with Yabu Pushelberg to renovate the second floor of Tiffany & Co.'s Fifth Avenue store in 1998. That success led to CoMoS being chosen to design the lighting for the entire seven-story flagship and all other Tiffany stores worldwide.

Another memorable job is the Le Meridien hotel in Minneapolis, accord-





When luxury brand Gucci wanted to erect a free-standing, eight-story building in Tokyo, they called upon architect Bill Sofield at Studio Sofield to implement their vision. Dubbed the Ginza Tower, the sophisticated lighting scheme was developed by CoMoS.

ing to Monato. "We had an amazing design until the 'value engineers' came on the project and ripped out the heart of the lighting design," she explains. "Afterwards, much of the concept just didn't hang together. We took the problem to Andy Pott of TPL, the agency in Toronto, and together worked out ways to achieve the look at one-third of the original budget. The

important things righted themselves and it received a Lumen Award of Excellence from the Illuminating Engineering Society (IES). Lessons learned: Life happens to a project. The challenge is to find ways to put magic back in," she affirms.



Growing Pains

CoMoS is currently booked solid with projects around the U.S. and overseas. (One of the most unusual assignments is devising the lighting for the interior of a private jet.) With such a non-stop sched-

COMMON GROUND

Monato and Cooley share many lighting design philosophies and aesthetic viewpoints that have remained constant during their partnership. Here are some of them:

- Pay attention to architectural composition. The illumination should hang together with it, and not be just a series of lighting events.
- Light emanates from architecture. Integrate lighting into the details rather than merely apply lighting to the surfaces.
- Light can be subtle or a major element in the space. A surface-mounted chandelier or pendant will bring an iconic feature to attention.
- Understand how people experience space. Who are they? Where are they? What are they used to? What can they expect?
- Realize how exciting it is to have the opportunity to influence how people experience their environment.

ule, the partners must juggle the pros and cons of taking on a substantially bigger staff to handle the overflow.

"We agree that we want to continue to build the practice by encouraging our staff to participate and exchange ideas," Monato says. "Our objective is to build on the culture we have established for our design studio. We share information studio-wide, and will design side-by-side on a daily basis."

Cooley adds that their designers get involved in all aspects of each job. "We don't hold them back; we don't pigeon-hole them. We want to grow the company from within with people who have put in their time and learned with us, and who have the talent and the inclination. We'd like to promote them to more senior positions," she reveals. The staff is expected to expertly prepare hand sketches quickly, putting them into CAD format later as the concept becomes more permanent.

The old adage, "good help is hard to find" even applies to design firms in Manhattan, where competition is fierce. Finding and acquiring talented newcomers is a challenge facing many busy lighting design practices like CoMoS.

"We've put the word out," Cooley admits. "We conduct guest lectures, serve on juries, and do anything with the potential of meeting new designers." CoMoS offers a smorgasbord of benefits to entice new hires, ranging from discretionary bonuses, full health insurance, and a retirement plan to transit stipends, personal and vacation days, comp time, and the week between Christmas and New Year's Day as paid time off. "It's a two-way street if you want to keep people working for you today," Cooley

states. CoMoS currently employs 13 professional and support personnel. After 15 years in the city's SoHo area, the office is moving to larger new offices in January to 137 East 25th Street in the Murray Hill section of Manhattan.

Giving Back

Cooley recently helped organize an exhibit of lighting designer Richard Kelly's work for the IES at the Center for Architecture in New York City. "It brought lighting to the attention of the architectural community," she notes. Cooley has also taught introductory lighting at Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) and has lectured on lighting at Parsons, Columbia University, and the Lighting Research Center (LRC) at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. "I wish I had more time to teach," she admits. "I always try to approach the course in the way that Peter Barna did with me. 'What do you want it to look like, and then let's talk about how to do it. Then we'll find the luminaires.'"

Cooley attends informal meetings sponsored by IALD's New York chapter meeting to discuss topics such as contract issues and how to get young people interested in lighting design. "We've been looking at the best ways to teach project management in our firms; new employees may not have learned those skills in school," she explains. College-level programs that combine the two disciplines of architecture and lighting are encouraged.

"Parsons is actively moving to integrate architecture and lighting," Cooley says. "Right now, we have an intern who is enrolled in a dual program in architecture and lighting at Rensselaer. In today's

world, the two courses of study needn't exist as separate satellites that do not talk to one another."

The partners in CoMoS agree that the profession has expanded far beyond the growth they would have predicted when they started their own office. "At the first Lumen Awards event in New York 12 years ago, there were a few dozen people attending. This year's venue attracted more than 800 people from all branches of the lighting industry," Cooley recounts.

Along with the classic constraints of schedule and budget, today's lighting designers have to know the allowable watts per square foot from the outset. "Energy code and LEED have been the largest [factors] outside of aesthetic that clients want from us now," Cooley comments. "As we are designing, we are also thinking about the wattage budget as well as the dollar budget. This involves applying our own value engineering for wattage to make sure we are not going over the allotment."

Cooley calls attention to the fact that energy codes – in their current form – emphasize watts per square foot and do not take ceiling heights into proper consideration. "Their standards are two-dimensional and do not incorporate the height of the space, but its footprint. Light falls off by the distance squared, so it is very three-dimensional," she points out.

Both Cooley and Monato believe that incandescent sources are necessary for aesthetic reasons to enhance the properties of the architecture and the objects in that space. "Basically, we design first, and then look at the watts," Monato explains. "It's give-and-take." However, the advancements being made by LED manufacturers regarding output are making solid-state lighting more applicable to a wider variety of installations, she adds.

The firm is currently working on a high-end project that hopefully will qualify for LEED Silver recognition. "This process makes lighting designers even more valuable on a project. It's our responsibility to keep the quality, the wattage, and the budget together," Monato affirms. ■