

Creative CEO: George Yabu and Glenn Pushelberg on Decision-Making and Noble Pursuits

Rana Florida



From [Bergdorf Goodman](#) and Tiffany on Wall Street in New York to Louis Vuitton in Hong Kong and Printemps in Paris, design duo George Yabu and Glenn Pushelberg have truly paved their own way, placing their indelible stamp on private residences, luxury resorts, restaurants, retail stores, and offices around the globe.

From their beginnings more than 40 years ago as Toronto's most forward-looking interior designers, George and Glenn have built their eponymous firm, [Yabu Pushelberg](#), into a multidisciplinary practice—with studios in New York and Toronto—that spans architecture, landscape, lighting, textiles, furniture, product design, and more. This comprehensive approach has allowed them to redefine luxury in the 21st century.

George and Glenn have accumulated a shelf full of honors, including induction into the [Interior Design Hall of Fame](#) and appointments as Officers of the [Order of Canada](#). But, as busy as they are, they found time to share some of their insights about creativity, business, leadership, curiosity, and inspiration with me, teaching me that if you are true to your vision and your craft, you can change the world—even if you start out picking drapes.



George Yabu (L) and Glenn Pushelberg (R) | Source: Yabu Pushelberg

Q. What was your first job and what lessons did you take from it?

Glenn: Honestly, I've never really worked for anybody. We were both working freelance. George's sister worked for a developer and helped him pick up small projects—residential projects, corporate projects—and I hustled.

George: Before even starting my career, I felt like an imposter. After four years of studying, I knew in a traditional office I'd be fired in less than a week. That's why I never worked for anybody in my life.

Glenn: I remember I was a contract employee when I first graduated. My job was to draft details of some store, but I liked to make the drawings look beautiful, so I would use graphite pencil and do shading. The woman working there tore a strip off me because when you do it this way, you can never change the drawing. If you erase the smudging, it looks terrible. And you know what I did? I walked out.

Q. What advice do you have for entrepreneurs starting out today?

Glenn: Be true to your craft, and the money will come. If you start with the premise of going into business to make money, you will destroy your craft.

George: Patience. Patience and a keen level of curiosity will fuel your search for answers, whether for design or anything else.

Q. What creative CEO would you love to have brunch with and why?

George: Bill Gates is one that I have a lot of empathy for and connection to. From day one, he wanted to create change in the world and change the world in a good way through technology. And he understood early on that the world was fraught with social issues, so he was well aware on his way to doing that to use caution.

He's said he's not a doomsday person. It's not that there are more awful things in the world—terrible calamities—than there were; it's that more people are aware of them and working to change them, and in doing so, bringing good things into the world. It's comforting, in a way.

Q. If you weren't doing what you're doing now, what other profession would you be in?

Glenn: When I graduated from high school, I was accepted into three different programs. One was fine arts at an art school, and I didn't think I should go there because I was too practical and didn't know how I'd make any money as an artist. Number two, which I was keen on and interested in, was hotel and food administration. I turned that down because it would mean I had to stay at home, and I was desperate to get out of a small town. Number three, the interior design program, looked like a lot of fun and you didn't have to write exams, so that's what I chose.

George: It was urban planning of all things, and when I look back, I think thank goodness; that would have been so depressing. I'm glad I didn't do that.

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— Glenn Pushelberg

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Q. Is scaling a business necessary for success? And what's the hardest part of scaling?

Glenn: No. It's not necessary to scale a business for success. It's important to create a scale of business that you feel you can create the best from.

The hardest part of scaling a business is that you hit certain plateaus, and you have to rejig how it's managed and how the information goes up and down in the organization. That goes back to your ability to adjust business models accordingly or having the right people on your team to do so without frustration so that there's still ease and clarity of what you do.

Q. What traits do you look for in selecting partners, collaborators, or team members?

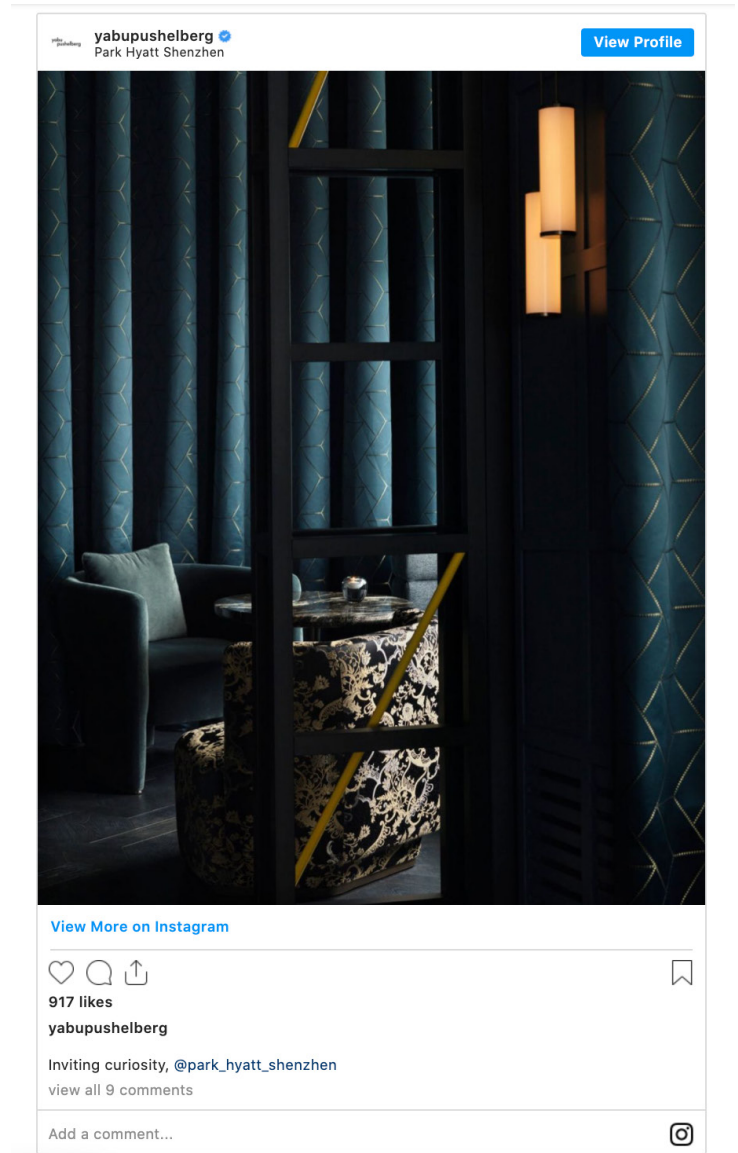
George: People who are not totally aligned in our way of thinking, but they have to be open enough to consider what's on the table, particularly as a team. The worst person to have in a partnership or collaboration is someone who just agrees with your direction and what you want to do. There's no tension to push the solution and come up with more than one solution. There's more than one way to slay the dragon. It's going to backfire if you don't show what you have to offer, and you just do what you're told to do.

Glenn: You want to work with like-minded people who have ambition to create something special and are willing to allow you to lead the design part of the process.

Q. What industry do you think is ripe for disruption?

Glenn and George: Hotels.

Glenn: They are microcosms of community. And, as we know—especially now—our communities are changing based on pandemics, based on politics, and all kinds of things. Good hotels are continuously being disrupted and changed, and now is a pivotal moment. You'll see many positive new ideas around the notion of a hotel as a result.



Q. When do you know it's time to let someone go?

Glenn: When you realize someone is not following the principles of your organization, you know that they are not part of your team. It's important to articulate the values of your organization first, and then from that it's easy to understand those who are with you and those who are not.

Q. What was your biggest failure, and what did you take away from it?

George: (*laughing*) Trying to convince my parents what an interior designer is.

Glenn: What the takeaway from it is, we were being awarded the Order of Canada; we were sitting at the ceremony and there were doctors going up for genome mapping, stem cell research, all of that. George and I looked at each other and said, "What are we doing here? All we do is pick drapes." But the moral of the story is that everything is noble depending on how you approach it.

Q. Where do you get your inspiration?

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Q. Would you rather hire young and inexperienced or old and experienced?

Glenn: Both, if there's a willingness to adapt and change to our ethos and values.

Q. What stifles your creativity?

Glenn: Partners who you realize don't have the same aspirations as you do for their project, even though you thought they did at the beginning.



Rana Florida is the CEO of Creative Class Group. An expert on business and leadership, Rana has written for numerous publications and been featured on programs such as The Today Show and MSNBC's The Cycle. She is also the author of *Upgrade—Taking Your Work and Life From Ordinary to Extraordinary*. (Photo credit: Gabor Jurina)

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