

# Lisa Roth & John Montgomery

## MONTGOMERY ROTH ARCHITECTURE & INTERIOR DESIGN

### A Breath of Fresh Air from Katrina

BY BARBARA R. DAVIS



When John Montgomery and Lisa Roth decided to combine their talents and create the unique concept of Montgomery Roth Architecture & Interior Design in 1998 in New Orleans, they projected that it would take their new firm several years to build up a reputation that could catapult their growth. To their pleasant surprise, inside their first year of inception, Montgomery Roth experienced great success and grew at a rapid pace. With a focus on the hospitality industry specializing in the design of hotels, casinos, and restaurants, New Orleans was a perfect place to start their company. After years of establishing a now successful business in New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina was heading their way and they had no choice but to find temporary refuge in Houston. Who would have ever thought that Montgomery Roth would ride in on the last big gust from Katrina and turn into such a breath of fresh air?

Lisa, who is a licensed architect and interior designer, has an undergraduate degree in interior design and a master's in architecture from Tulane University and John, who is licensed as an architect and studied at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, first met at Perez Ernst Farnet, APC, Architects. They both had a passion for hospitality design and worked together on exciting hotel and casino



The Montgomery Roth Team often gets together to cook up new designs for their clients.

projects across the globe with projects in Tunisia, North Africa, and The Bahamas as well as local hotels like Harrah's Casino in New Orleans, the first of Louisiana's land-based casinos. Working closely together for three years, John and Lisa became keenly aware of each other's talents, strengths, and career goals. Most importantly, they realized that their greatest desire was to work in a firm that focused on hospitality design and provide both architecture and interior design with equal emphasis.

Quite often, John and Lisa would be a sounding board for their clients' frustrations in having to hire interior designers and architects from two separate firms. It often resulted in separate companies trying to achieve separate agendas including separate budgets, schedules, and design concepts. It was then that John and Lisa had the epiphany to start a business together that would address their clients' frustrations. Tourism in New Orleans was the city's primary industry and they felt they had a strong chance for success with a focus on hospitality design. With hundreds of existing hotels in New Orleans with restaurants and bars and a new casino under construction, they believed a firm that could provide all design services would be perfect.

Their vision was clear; John and Lisa truly believed that there was a unique opportunity to form a company that would

streamline the design and construction process so hotel owners, general managers, and hotel management companies could go to one firm for architecture, interior design, and procurement services. They launched Montgomery Roth Architecture & Interior Design on April 1, 1998 and hit the ground running in a niche market by offering three in-demand services through one company. Word got out rapidly and their business grew like wildfire. Within the first month of starting the firm, Montgomery Roth was hired by notable companies such as Harrah's, the Intercontinental Hotel Group, and Sheraton.

Before the end of their first year in business, Montgomery Roth had proven itself to be capable of doing all they had set out to do. There were no firms in New Orleans and a limited number nationwide that could provide expertise in three distinct areas. John and Lisa worked very hard to develop the right team and became quite established as a leader working in the hospitality luxury arena in the United States. Within a short time, Montgomery Roth's reach grew and they were awarded international projects including the design of the Disney Hotel in Hong Kong.

After years of establishing a successful business in New Orleans, news that Hurricane Katrina was about to hit the Atlantic seaboard began to worry John and Lisa. Hurricane evacuations were quite common in the area but it quickly became

apparent that Katrina was a much stronger storm than the New Orleans natives were accustomed to. In 2005, John and Lisa made the decision to find a nearby city away from the storm's devastation to temporarily relocate their practice. Having an ideal location, strong business potential, and personal connections for the pair, Houston immediately topped their list.

Arriving in Houston just a few days after Katrina, Lisa and John urgently rushed to get Montgomery Roth back in operation. With half their clients rooted in other parts of the country including New York, Georgia, Nevada, and California, they didn't want to interrupt their work flow. "Within a few days after Katrina, our clients called to make sure we were all okay but also needed to understand the impact this storm might have on their projects," recalled John. Lisa began the initial steps to set up a temporary office. As a longtime member of the New Orleans Chapter of the Entrepreneurs Organization, she reached out to the Houston Chapter for aid. Lisa reflected, "The immediate response from the members of the organization was incredible. They were able to help us find office space and temporary housing, and introduced us to some great professional resources!"

Eager to keep project scheduling commitments to their clients, John and Lisa were faced with the challenging task of setting up a new office in Houston while saving everything they could from their office in New Orleans. In the days that followed the storm, New Orleans remained flooded, not readily accessible, and more importantly, quite dangerous. In spite of the obstacles, John made the heroic decision to return. "About two weeks after Katrina, we actually had special passes to get into the city because it was all locked down by the National Guard," stated John. "Our office building never reopened but we were still able to retrieve equipment and pertinent files. There was no electricity so we had to put flashlights on the landings and mining caps on our heads while we ran up and down the six flights of stairs as we gathered up all of our possessions and put them into a U-haul!"



The Montgomery Roth Design Team always provides quality assurance for their growing family of satisfied clients!

Immediately following the evacuation, New Orleans area hotels began to fill up again housing the National Guard, disaster management teams, insurance company underwriters, and even returning residents. Montgomery Roth's previous clients, like Harrah's Casino, Sheraton, and Hilton, looked to them again for design assistance. "Having guest damage and flood damage, they called on us to help them with the necessary renovations. Basically, we were one of the few firms actually working in New Orleans immediately following the storm. There was a mutual benefit; we were trying to rebuild and so were they," recalled Lisa. For four months, the New Orleans team worked out of Lisa's home which had the least amount of flood damage while Lisa established and worked with a team in Houston to continue to meet other clients' needs. Along the way, new working relationships were created with the likes of Starwood Hotels, Hilton Hotels, and Pinnacle Entertainment.

After experiencing Houston's incredible business environment, John and Lisa knew that making Montgomery Roth's Houston office a permanent one would be a good decision for the success of their firm. "Houston is a great city. It is a city that really welcomes people. Obviously, there are challenges when you have a lot of people coming here, many without any money or resources. All in all," said Lisa, "we found that everyone we worked with was very supportive, very informative, and really

wanted to see people land on their feet. The business community was amazing, and we were met with supportive, caring, and extremely helpful Houstonians at every turn."

Briefly subletting in a downtown high rise tower, Montgomery Roth then moved into a self-designed new build-out in the Galleria area of Houston where they still reside today. Due to Houston's incredible business development, the office has grown three times the size they were in New Orleans before the Katrina devastation. Months following the storm, a new location for the New Orleans office was found in the Texaco Building in downtown New Orleans. John and Lisa made a commitment to reestablish business there and go back to give support to the ones who helped them.

Montgomery Roth has weathered through the times and has been able to grow since its inception in 1998 because of its flexibility and diversity. They have been listed as one of the "Fast 100" by the Houston Business Journal for the past two years and have received many design awards along the way. With business currently in twelve states, Montgomery Roth is licensed in all of them as well. Regardless of location, they know all the ins and outs of licensing and are capable of quickly dealing with the qualifications required to become licensed wherever their services are requested. Similarly, they make a habit

of connecting with local architectural and interior design firms when working nationally and internationally so that they are always on top of local regulatory codes and policies.

John and Lisa act independently in their roles with the company. They have different client groups with varying desires, approaches, and building types. One thing that always remains constant is their commitment to excellence in both design and functionality. Lisa explained, "We always meet interesting people who are very challenging, creative, and intense. They are very aware that the quality of the design and how well it's thought out is not only from an esthetic perspective. How well the design functions and how it can be maintained is critical to the success of all of our projects. So there is a lot of time spent on each property trying to get it right; it's a collaborative effort."

John accredits this type of thinking to the close, personal relationships he has established with clients throughout his career. In 2005, after a year of work, a project to design a Cabo Wabo Cantina location at the Harrah's Casino in New Orleans for former Van Halen lead singer Sammy Hagar was cancelled due to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. John had developed both a professional and personal relationship with Sammy and, years later, Sammy commissioned Montgomery Roth to do several other build-outs for him including

the Cabo Wabo location at Planet Hollywood in Las Vegas. "Sammy is such a nice, down-to-Earth guy and so sympathetic after Katrina. Lisa and I have learned that when you work with very amazing people, it's not just about how they conduct business, it's just how they are as a human being and that's where I am with Sammy," remarked John.

Through the years, Montgomery Roth has successfully established a strong residential clientele along with their hospitality work. Lisa has found there to be a direct correlation between their residential and hospitality projects, namely that residential clients see the elaborate, well-detailed work that Montgomery Roth does in hotels and spas and want to bring that to their residential projects. Similarly, most design trends start in the residential sector and later translate to the world of hotel design, so most hospitality clients want their properties to have that residential feel.

Lisa expressed, "I think part of our success is that we do different project types. We do some residential, hotels, casinos, and restaurants but we also do different sizes. Having 30 people between the two offices makes us large enough to handle really big hotel projects, but we are also happy to help somebody who wants us to renovate the kitchen in their home. In addition to being flexible with the size and scale of projects, we pride ourselves on being flexible with schedules and how we build a team of people."

Whether it is residential or hospitality design, Montgomery Roth's clients choose them for their unique approach in reaching strong design solutions. From architectural and interior design to product procurement, John and Lisa have cultivated an environment where clients can have all their needs met. By collaborating closely with their team in both the Houston and New Orleans offices to reach one common goal, they have established long-term relationships with their clients. Their hardship in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina has taught them to give back to their community including Habitat for Humanity, the American Red Cross, the American Cancer



John & Lisa make it terrific, both and are happy to share their lessons learned with their clients and associates.

Society, and the Periwinkle Foundation. In addition, they believe in employee appreciation and recently rewarded a long-term employee for exceptional work and dedication by naming him partner.

As Montgomery Roth expands its business, John and Lisa's goal is to continue

to grow the company internally while streamlining the design and construction process, and always providing exceptional service to new and continuing clients in three different design aspects... just another example of Montgomery Roth's fresh approach in all they do.

## TAKE AWAY NOTES FOR SUCCESS

- 1 Invest in yourself. You are the one and only thing out there that you can actually control. If you invest in yourself, you will get direct, proportional returns on it.
- 2 Invest in your team, too. Whenever you can, invest in them spiritually, financially, socially or in any other way you can. We don't sell widgets; we sell the creative by-product of other human beings. If they are not happy or don't feel like we care, their work will reflect that. We are working on that every day. We are always providing training, team building events, and social activities like charity events to develop camaraderie and an understanding of each other.
- 3 Get to know who your clients are. They are not all the same. Every corporate client culture is different and you have to be able to be flexible in how you provide services and how you communicate with them. You have to find a way to set up a system that keeps up with the clients' individual preferences and you need to customize your service to their needs.
- 4 Never cut corners with your attorney, with your financial institution, or with your accountant.
- 5 Most importantly, do what you love and be passionate about it. If you don't love what you are doing you will not be successful.



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