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Life by Design

Architect Nancy Dougherty and interior designer Sandee Markwith rely on creativity and attention to detail to manage home and family.

Rennie Ackerman



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Studio 1200 isn't like most architectural firms.

For one thing, it's situated at street level along the main drag of Millburn, amid shoe stores and high-end boutiques. For another, it's owned and operated by two women—architect Nancy Dougherty and interior designer Sandee Markwith—who, although very busy mothers and wives, decided to go into business together.



While it's always a leap of faith to start a business with someone, it's also a matter of trust and instinct. "Sometimes," Dougherty and Markwith simultaneously observe, "You meet someone and you just know."



The duo met several years ago while working at Gensler, one of the world's largest international architectural firms. That's where they learned the business ropes—and a thing or two about working together. "We were in charge of the parties," Markwith says. "We'd go the whole nine yards: mariachi bands, tequila—the sky was the limit." One memorable event was their Kentucky Derby-themed affair—complete with mint juleps, fanciful hats and currency printed with their co-workers' faces. Those early career triumphs cemented their relationship, while collaborating successfully on a creative level sparked their interest in forming a professional partnership.

They knew they wanted to work together, but waited for the timing to be right. In 2004, when Markwith dissolved a previous business partnership and Dougherty ended long-term stints with Gensler and the Rosen Group, another smaller firm, they decided they were ready. Despite the sluggish economy, Dougherty

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Photo by Michael Frost,
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Bronte retro bikini in mustard by recent NBC Fashion
Star contestant Nikki Poulos, \$165 at nikkipoulos.com;
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hat, \$595 at Neiman Marcus in Short Hills; Andean
Collection riverbed bracelets, \$26 each at
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and Markwith persevered, and now, seven years later, couldn't be happier with their collaboration: Studio 1200.

"We love coming to work and we love that we're great partners," Dougherty says. "If one of us has the dreaded design block, we just work through it together until we find a solution." Since Markwith is a designer and Dougherty is an architect, the pair can tackle most projects from A to Z. They approach even the simplest projects holistically, with utmost attention to the context and surroundings. As Markwith puts it: "Just doing the décor without considering the structure is like lipstick and rouge. That's not us."

The Studio 1200 offices at 511 Millburn Avenue represent the partners' aesthetic: contemporary clean lines in an open, airy first-floor space that is warm and inviting. Even details such as the shots of bright orange—from the file folders to the paper clips—are carefully planned. Every design element is considered, and passes muster only if it reflects the desired vibe. Markwith and Dougherty's projects receive the same detailed treatment, while embracing a wide range of styles.

As any working mom knows, the professional piece of the pie overlaps the home front in so many ways. While other kids were watching DVDs on long car rides, Dougherty and Markwith's children became expert "spot-the-architectural-element players," says Dougherty. "Our kids are the best Mansard roof, corbel and quoins spotters in town."

For Markwith, 42, who lives in West Orange with her husband, Tom Kwiatkowski, and 8-year-old son, Cameron, a second grader at Redwood Elementary school, an organized schedule helps the day run smoothly. Markwith is in charge of getting Cam ready for school in the morning. Kwiatkowski's business requires a crack-of-dawn start but offers an early finish. He meets Cam's bus at 3:30 and is on afterschool activity detail. Markwith put her creativity to work to convince "her guys" that they are the cooks of the house. When she gets home, she's greeted by their homemade gourmet dishes. "Thai coconut noodles with shrimp and peanuts was my favorite," she says.

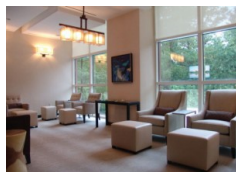
Dougherty, 47, lives in Maplewood with husband Jay, an editor at Saatchi & Saatchi, who is better known around town as lead vocalist of local rock group the Jaybirds of Maplewoodstock fame. Their two kids, Kerrigan, a 16-year-old junior at Kent Place in Summit, and Paul, a 13-year-old seventh grader at South Orange Middle School, are at an age when they can fend for themselves. Jay handles dinner duty. "Somehow it all just works when you want it to," Dougherty says. After dinner, "the kids and I often work together at the dining room table late into the night," she says. "I have a big orange shower caddy that I use for drawing supplies, and they like to share with me. Design moms have the best art supplies in town!"

The partners often involve their kids in projects, and actually appreciate their less-than-tactful feedback. "They are often spot on. If something stinks, they let us know right away," says Dougherty.

"We're both a little type A and have the same philosophy," says Markwith—and Dougherty finishes the thought: "Work hard, play hard, really listen, and love what you do." It shows.

Portfolio: Studio 1200

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While Sandee Markwith and Nancy Dougherty pride themselves on never getting too big to do a single room, one of the projects they're most excited about right now is a renovation of the Westin Governor Morris hotel in Morristown, which includes a 224-room design overhaul, as well as the lobby and reception area. They competed against Gensler, the company where they met, to score the commission.

Some of Studio 1200's recent work includes the Transition Lounge, top, at the Eforea Spa in Short Hills; the Blackthorn restaurant in Parsippany, center; and a prefunction area at Ogilvy CommonHealth in Parsippany.

The partnership of Nancy Dougherty and Sandee Markwith commenced in 2008. All images of projects featured are the property of Studio 1200.



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Paul, Cameron and Kerrigan get some filing done.



CIVIC MINDED: The Studio 1200 team also does pro bono work in their communities and offers mentoring and internship opportunities to young people.

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