Yvonne Chang And Jae Lee On Being Women In A Man's Startup World
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Yvonne Chang and Jae Lee are, in some respects, your average entrepreneurs. They're young, visionary, and adaptable. Feeling disillusioned with the corporate world, they set off on their own, hoping to effect change in their communities, but simultaneously yearning for more far-reaching influence. It's a narrative familiar to the world of startups, but one that calls to mind a cadre of uber-famous white men—and with good reason: this spring, Crunchbase reported that only seventeen percent of venture-backed startups have a female founder. This unfortunate statistic has remained roughly the same for the past five years.

So it remains—and will remain, until venture capitalists fund women founders at the same rate as men—something of an act of courage each time anyone who isn't a man decides to found a company.

Chang and Lee are doubly pioneering, entering the architecture startup space. Architecture, a cousin of the fine arts and construction industries—both of which have historically been openly hostile to women—is plagued by dismal reports of inequality. Their presence, then, is a disruption not only by definition, but because of their choice of industry within industry. And that's before we get to their work.

As founders, first, of Public Matter, the pair melded architecture, design, and social awareness with projects such as Scratchbox, an urban installation meant to encourage city dweller's interaction with art and with their environment. From there, they moved to Wildrence, a community bringing data collection to immersive design. Suffice it to say, they are not your traditional architects.

They'd each spent a couple years interning and working for corporate architecture firms after graduating in 2012 from Cornell's College of Architecture, Art, and Planning, which Lee describes as a program focused on much more than engineering.

"A lot of times when people look at buildings they think, 'Architecture is very engineering-based' or [that] it's all about the mechanics of building a building." This expectation, she said, "is true, but at least at Cornell, it is an incredibly design-theory oriented program. We were really trained to think critically."

This penchant for problem solving coupled with their strong sense of creativity left them frustrated with the long timelines typical for the projects managed by their firms.

"Working on a project and realizing it takes ten years for it to happen was a shock," Lee said. "In school, you have one semester to design, build, create models, and pretend that the project is reality."

She and Chang slowly became involved in a collective designing projects with social impact until, eventually, they wanted to work on them full-time. So they quit—a decision Lee says was frightening, but that led to the founding of Wildrence.

Based on the Lower East Side in Manhattan, the company currently co-produces the production of two immersive experiences in a space, The Mist, it owns.

The first, *HERE*, is an immersive dance production conceived and directed by Kelly Bartnik, a performer from *Sleep No More*, the immersive retelling of Macbeth popular with the theatre in-crowd. It's a story told in episodes, and is meant to be intimate—only a handful of people can attend to each showing.

The second, Refuge, is where Chang and Lee really push the boundaries. It's an immersive game, similar to those Escape the Room challenges that have been popping up across the country, but with an environmental-collapse conceit, higher production value, and a model that forces participants to compete against rather than alongside one another. It also happens to be built on a platform that allows its users' choices to be recorded.

"The space that we have has a huge tech background. We can measure how many people pressed this button at what time and what location," Lee said. "We're able to give metrics to how people behave in space, with an added layer of how people are solving problems."

This has huge implications—both from the perspective of designers, utilizing user data to inform design choices, and from the perspective of users, looking to gain valuable information about behavior. It could give companies insight into the decision-making of teams of employees, or, theoretically, allow for informed design experimentation.

So, it's sort of like Escape the Room, and also way beyond Escape the Room.

This is not to diminish the challenges that presented themselves along Chang and Lee's journey of leaps and pivots.

Scratchbox, for example, made clear the difference women in urban design are treated—particularly when they're young and not white. The installation is constructed of eight-foot boxes of plexiglass coated in a special paint that, when scratched away, reveals the illumination originating from within. The box becomes the canvas for the community. It also reveals the stereotypes people have about what a woman's body can achieve.

"We're two Asian females and would have to show up on site and assemble it," Chang said. "I think most people were always surprised that we are the team behind the structure. They are always surprised, [saying], 'Oh, you guys can build this.'"

The women also noticed a difference in the way they were treated at networking events—crucial for startup founders seeking support—and at pitch meetings, where they felt like they had to prove themselves to an extreme level.

"The expectations are higher when you're trying to pitch a project or represent a strong idea" as a woman, Lee said. "When you're sitting in front of mostly guys, it's hard and you can tell right away that there's a shift in tone."

The difference became particularly apparent after a meeting with TED, Lee said, which is staffed predominantly by women: "Because everyone we talked to was the same gender as us, they didn't ever ask us, 'Can you build this? Are you sure you can do that?' There's less of a hurdle to convince them that we are capable."

This experience is shared by women across industries, and Chang and Lee represent the women fighting similar battles on a daily basis. They haven't let it deter them, and have plans to expand into the intersection of the food and design spaces, citing an interest in how architecture, culinary arts, and food-related experiences have been colliding in recent years.

"We both have had projects in mind for the eating experience," all involving an immersive experience at The Mist, Chang said. "We went through different iterations: one is to measure how people eat; what food they take; what course [they select]; if they have different tables, [at] which table do they sit down."

The projects they create in the near future, informed by tech, design, architecture, and social awareness are sure to continue to shatter expectations of what architects can accomplish. As Lee said, despite being "architects coming from very perfectionist backgrounds," they still "have to be very comfortable with pivoting very fast."

And as a company staffed only by two people, they have to be comfortable developing an expertise in every facet of business management in order to grow.

"We have to do everything," Chang said. "The struggle is that we never have enough manpower to do everything that we want."

But it seems, to Chang and Lee, that this huge challenge—insurmountable to the average person—just happens to be one more task on a list of things to get done before moving to the next level. Their larger goals prevent them from getting bogged down by the reality of the situation: "If you have an idea about how you want to change the world, I think you should never be afraid to verge from your traditional path and try it out," Lee said.

They are, after all, pioneering young visionaries. It's exactly this kind of thinking that will continue to buoy them to success.