When you look at their work, it’s exactly the way it should be. You wouldn’t want to change anything. The sense of scale is impeccable. So are the materials. If it’s a building façade, it might be 10 by 200 feet, with the corporate logo-type cut from brushed stainless steel. If it’s a book, it might be four by six inches, perfect-bound, with the title embossed into finely textured cover stock. Whatever the discipline or media, the look is classic, but not exactly like anything you can remember seeing before.

This is the work of L. Richard Poulin and Douglas Morris, who, by their own admission, live and breathe design 24/7. Their work is rooted in Modernism, in the International Typographic Style of the 1960s and ’70s, but it has its own refined sensibility. “We learn from Modernism,” says Morris, “but we don’t copy it or repeat it.” Adds Poulin, “We tend to shake ourselves up. We try not to fall into the comfort zone of style.”

Since 1990, they have built their SoHo firm to foster a new paradigm of collaboration—with each other, with clients and with staff.

L. Richard Poulin is a 1977 Pratt graduate in Industrial design. After a short stint at The Eulenkontor Group, an urban planning and architecture firm, he began working for the late designer Rudolph deHarak. “I didn’t want to go to Detroit and design cars or go to Sunbeam and design vacuum cleaners, the usual route for industrial design majors,” he says. “I wanted to be involved in all design disciplines, and Rudy was my mentor.”

After two years deHarak made him a partner. Three years later deHarak retired, and Poulin inherited the business. “Rudy had a strong personality,” says Poulin. “He was tough, demanding, intense. I was one of the few people who came through his office who could deal with him. But when he retired, I had to figure out what I wanted to do, without becoming a clone of Rudy.”

Douglas Morris graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1985. A graphic design major, he knew, also, that he didn’t want to limit his work to printed pieces, to ink on paper. “At RISD, you could observe all areas of design,” he recalls. “As students, we’d go to gallery shows and openings, visit studios, talk about ideas.” Morris began his career at The Architects Collaborative, the Cambridge, Massachusetts, firm founded by Walter Gropius, where he worked on building

Poulin + Morris

BY ELLEN SHAPIRO

ears, a firm that specializes in environmental graphics, sign systems and public art.

Poulin and Morris met at a Society of Environmental Graphic Design (SEGD) conference at Cranbrook Academy in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. At the time, neither was sure what he wanted to do next. Except that it should be something a little different. Poulin was seriously considering applying to film school at NYU. “I was burned out; I’d been spending too much of my time on plans and writing proposals,” he recalls. Morris had been offered a partnership in Two Twelve. “I took it as a compliment,” he says, “but I was also at a crossroads and wasn’t sure I wanted to go in that direction.”

They did a couple of joint-venture projects together and, as Morris says, “The connection was immediate. It was so much fun. It felt like it didn’t take more than a week for both of us to say, ‘Let’s go into business together.’”

It’s been twelve years.

The partners often work together for fourteen hours a day. But they claim that the work doesn’t consume them in a negative way. “It motivates us,” says Morris.

All photographs by Deborah Kushma, Deborah Kushma Photography, except where noted. Captions provided by L. Richard Poulin.


Morgan Stanley World Headquarters, New York, New York. “Morgan Stanley, one of the largest securities and financial management firms in the world, commissioned us to brand their new headquarters in Times Square. Our primary objective was to integrate the first five stories of the building façade to the visual fabric of the area, while conforming with strict code requirements of the Times Square Redevelopment Authority. The result, a giant information display comprised of several large scale sign elements, is one of the largest illuminated and animated façades in the area. Two rear-illuminated cylinders are located at the building corners and display the Morgan Stanley logotype. Directly above are three, stacked electronic ‘zipper’ panels that transmit information in ‘real time.’ News bulletins are carried on one panel, with stock market quotations, commodity prices and foreign exchange rates on the other two. Digital panels displaying financial data and advertising are positioned on the north and south corners of the building.” Ten, three