

Up Close and Personal with The Design Shop Girls by Brian Campbell

Amanda Minuk was fresh out of Environmental Design at the University of Manitoba, Faculty of Architecture and just starting her first job when she met Debbie Golub. Debbie had been working for her second firm for a year and a half, but she and Amanda developed a connection almost immediately. So much of a connection in fact that, when Debbie left to work elsewhere, Amanda joined her soon after.

Amanda said, “We had a good chemistry together; we were both strong conceptual designers and loved to push boundaries. We brainstormed and sketched together, and I just didn’t feel that ‘design chemistry’ with anyone else.”

They worked together at the company for about a year (Debbie had been there just short of three), before life circumstances changed and it was time to go out on their own. Debbie explained, “I always knew that I was going to start my own business. So when I selected my jobs, I picked them deliberately in order to research and gain the experience I thought I would need. Then all I had to do was to find a like-minded person, a partner in crime, with whom I could grow as a designer and as an entrepreneur.”

“I wasn’t thinking that far ahead,” Amanda added. “But when we started talking about it, we realized that a work-life balance was very important to both of us; we wanted to make sure that life was a priority. And we said that we wanted to have fun every day.”

“Creative minds need to have balance and time for discovery,” Debbie said. “We recognized that it was critical for us to be successful. We work hard and because we work in teams, we have found a way to have it all, at least so far!”

The official name of the company is “The Design Shop Inc.” but their clients, reps and peers recognize them simply as Design Shop and more recently as ‘The Design Shop Girls’. “The name wasn’t something that we created, but people began to call

us the ‘Design Shop Girls’, so we embraced it. It has become our hashtag #designshopgirls. Search it and you will see!” Debbie said.

They have even taken ‘The Design Shop Girls’ brand into an informal clothing line, consisting of sweatshirts, t-shirts and tank tops. The logo design on the sweatshirts was created by local script artist Kal Barteski. “We originally ordered the sweatshirts just for us to wear during our team building trip, and upon our return they became popular. We are now waiting for our third order to arrive,” Amanda said. “There are about 200 units out there.”

Although Amanda and Debbie are the co-owners, the full team includes two additional members, Natasha and Mel. Debbie said, “We work as a team and collaborate on every project. That way, if one member of the team has an appointment, a holiday, or can’t be on location, a second designer can step in seamlessly.”

Debbie and Mel went to school together and worked with some of the same freelance clients. Amanda and Natasha have also worked together while at another firm. They all have the same core skill sets, but each member brings their own specialties and personality to the table, and they try to match each team member to design jobs and clients that suit them. Debbie said, “It is a very personal process, so we want to make sure that the chemistry between our designers, our client and the job at hand are well suited.”

The collaborative effort includes, not only the girls of Design Shop, but the input they receive from their clients and contractors as well. “We see design as more of a collaborative process, from the client to the contractor and all of the sub-trades,” Amanda said. “A lot of contractors and builders look to us for job referrals and often refer us to their clients.”

Their creativity and design versatility gives them access to a wide target market. “We obviously get very excited by the meaty jobs, but do find enjoyment in the smaller scope projects as well. Design challenges come in all shapes and sizes,” Debbie said.

“We pride ourselves on making interior design accessible,” Amanda added. “Occasionally, people want to do some of the legwork themselves, so we have the motto of ‘we’re happy to do as much or as little as you want or need.’ We don’t want anybody to feel pressured to hire us only to do the full scope.”

“We also do commercial interior design. We like to work on ‘mom and pop’ shops,” Amanda said. “Even though we also love working with larger companies or leasing companies, we find the tighter budget projects lend themselves to being more creative. It is easy to spend money. It isn’t so easy to be creative with a low budget. We thrive on the challenge.”

Design Shop specializes in both residential and commercial interior design. “We also love to develop the brand of our interiors. Branding is a big umbrella word; some people understand branding to be a logo, a graphic image, or a tagline,” Debbie explained. “We do some graphic and copy work, but where we really work with a brand is when we use the company identity and values and integrate that into the design of a space. It is important for us to not only make a space functional and aesthetically pleasing, but to take some of that business personality and design it into the interior.”

“It isn’t just about matching colours,” Amanda said. “It is about who you are as a company and the values you want to bring across.”

“Branding is an experience,” Debbie added. “And space is one of the strongest mediums for creating a memorable experience.”

Although Debbie and Amanda have much of the same training and very similar skill-sets, they also have individual strengths. Debbie said. “I see things from the big picture, then down to the little details, whereas Amanda works from the micro to the macro.”

“Our personalities balance each other well,” Amanda added. “When it comes to our 2D work, I do a bit more of the graphic work, and Debbie is very good at doing copy, such as writing an article or creating taglines.”

As with any two individuals, different thought processes sometimes lead to different ideas and opinions, but Debbie and Amanda have managed to turn those differences into advantages. “As business owners, we have learned that we can’t sweat the small stuff. There has to be give and take,” Amanda said.

“That’s how you get better ideas,” Debbie added. “If you have a bit of a discomfort and you have a constructive way of resolving issues, you evolve and grow and you are more creative and ultimately your end product is better.”

At this point, Amanda and Debbie aren’t sure where to go from here. “We have to revisit our business plan,” Amanda said. “We have met all of our five year goals

already. We need to dream bigger. We're really open to ideas and to opportunities that are presented to us."

Amanda and Debbie still run Design Shop out of their homes, Amanda in Tuxedo and Debbie just on edge of Tuxedo, which works well for them. Debbie said, "About 60 to 65% of our residential work comes from the Tuxedo, River Heights areas."

They also have a lot of family living in the neighbourhood. Amanda said, "It's kind of neat to drive through Tuxedo and see our Design Shop hot pink lawn signs. We both love pink."

"Don't worry, we don't design everything in pink," Debbie added quickly. "But if you're willing..."

"We have our own personal taste, of course, but that's not what we bring to the table. We work based off the client's tastes, their lifestyle needs, their budget and the architecture of their home," Amanda said.

Even though they work all over Winnipeg and beyond, they enjoy having their business based in the Tuxedo area; helping friends and family and their friends and family upgrade and renovate their homes in the neighbourhood. They plan to continue doing it for the foreseeable future. Amanda said, "It's a place we've called home forever, that we are comfortable with and excited to work in."