DESIGNERS OF THE YEAR
We visited EDIDA top prize winners, husband-and-wife team Doshi Levien at their Barbican home and Shoreditch studio in London to discuss their success – they also won the Best in Floor Coverings award (see p46!)

Words DOMINIC LUTYENS Photography FILIPPO BAMBERGH/FOTOFOYER

Award-winners Jonathan Levien and Nipa Doshi, who sit on a ‘Marshmallow’ sofa by George Nelson in their London apartment.
BACK IN 2007, design aficionados were stopped in their tracks by one of Italian brand Moroso’s latest offerings: a daybed with mattresses bearing patchwork checkerboard patterns and multi-coloured squares reminiscent of a TV testcard. It was the work of Doshi Levien, formed in 2000 by Scottish-born Jonathan Levien and Bombay-born Nipa Doshi. Inspired by traditional Indian designs, the ‘Charpoy’ daybed was hand-embroidered by craftswomen at Doshi’s aunt’s workshop in India, before being teamed with a high-tech wooden frame. The design was sharp, graphic, intricately patterned but not folksy and an early example of this multidisciplinary studio’s love of playfully marrying contradictions: technology and craftsmanship, Western and Indian cultures, strict geometry and a sensual use of colour.

Doshi, who studied furniture design at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India, and Levien, who trained in cabinet-making and then industrial design, met as graduate students at the Royal College of Art. Tom Dixon, Habitat’s design director at the time, gave them their first break in 2001, commissioning tableware for the high-street chain. Since then the duo has designed bathroom cabinets for Authentics, furniture for Cappellini and Hay, plus outdoor fabrics for Kettal and packaging for cosmetics brand Madina and shoemaker John Lobb. ‘I feel as if we’re entering a brand new phase,’ says Doshi. ‘We’d love to be involved in creating a neighbourhood. How might a community of the future be?’ We met the creative pair in their East London studio to learn more about their inspirations.

Were you interested in design as children?
JL I wasn’t, but my parents had a soft-toy factory near our house in Elgin, which gave me access to materials and tools. I was always making things. I began learning cabinet-making at the age of 16. Then my uncle, Robin Levien, an industrial designer who’s worked for Ideal Standard – he often jokes that one in every three British toilets is his work – got me interested in his world. He showed me amazing foam models of his designs.

ND As a child I wasn’t aware that design existed, but I was fascinated by my environment. I grew up in New Delhi and lived in a dusty-pink Art Deco house, a style that I assumed was Indian. My aunt’s house was designed by an assistant of Le Corbusier’s. I think I’ve always been influenced by architecture, but one that’s living, not preserved in aspic for tourists. In India there’s an irreverence that I love; no one even thinks twice about hanging a Coca-Cola sign in the high court at Chandigarh, a building which was designed by Le Corbusier. I was lucky that I had a neighbour who worked in urban development. He suggested that I draw my plan of a dream home; eventually that moment of encouragement led to my studying at the National Institute of Design.

Although you grew up on different continents, do you share any common ground?
JL We shared one cultural connection – 1980s pop music. All of those Culture Club, Eurythmics and Michael Jackson classics.

ND My family didn’t own a colour TV until I was about 13, and I remember watching the Grammy Awards in colour for the first time.

The couple’s home features many of their own designs, including the ‘Capo’ chair for Cappellini, a ‘Chandigarh’ sofa for Moroso, the ‘Rahari’ rug for Nanimarquina (all left) and ‘Charpoy’ daybed for Moroso (above).
I thought that was the height of cool. Fortunately, my school in Delhi wasn’t cut off from the wider world: it was very international and politically engaged. We held anti-apartheid demonstrations, for which I designed posters.

**What were your first jobs?**

**JL** I worked for designer Ross Lovegrove. He'd give us his sketches, which we then had to translate into working products. The breadth of his work is phenomenal. He was designing watches for Tag Heuer and first-class seats for Japan Airlines, so it gave me tremendous scope to develop as a designer.

**ND** My very first job after arriving in London was working in Tom Dixon’s Notting Hill shop Space, which indirectly led to my going to study at the RCA. Tom suggested that I contact my hero, Jasper Morrison, but he was ex-directory so I looked him up at his home. I forgot to write down his address, but managed to work out where he lived as his was the only house without lace curtains! I asked him for a job, but he recommended that I apply to the RCA first. I got a scholarship there.

**Which design made your name?**

**ND** If we had to pick just one, it would be our ‘Rabari’ rugs for Spanish manufacturer Nanimarquina – they’ve been very well received. In fact, they won the Best Floor Covering category in this year’s EDIDA awards (see p46).

**JL** Another key piece of ours is the ‘My Beautiful Backside’ for Moroso.

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Its backrest is made up of differently sized cushions – it’s a new shape for a sofa.

**What has been your biggest challenge?**

**ND** Being confident in our way of thinking. When you move countries, as I did, all of your values – your idea of beauty, the way that you dress – are questioned and I’ve always had to be confident that my vision is valid.
A major challenge is ensuring that your designs are appropriate to the company they’re made for; they can be a failure if not. Choosing projects carefully comes with experience.

**What are your interests outside of work?**

**JL** I’m learning the tabla (Indian drums) at the Bhavan Centre, a hub of Indian music and dance in West Kensington, London.

**ND** Me, too. I’m also learning Indian classical singing. It’s very de-stressing, and the classes feel very equal as everyone – even 11-year-olds – go to them – sits on the floor. My aim is to give my own concert in three years or so.

**What’s your house like?**

**JL** We live in a duplex in the Barbican Centre – I love its idea of communal living, it feels Utopian. Our furniture mostly consists of pieces given to us, and our own designs. The only piece we’ve bought is an Eero Saarinen ‘Tulip’ chair. Having lived with our ‘Capo’ chair for Cappellini, I’ve discovered that it’s the perfect place to sit and read to our son. Friends sleep on a ‘Charpoy’ daybed when they stay over. We also designed our own bed, as we couldn’t find one we liked.

It’s larger and lower than a normal bed, and the mattress is embedded in a wooden frame so that it looks as if it’s on a platform. It makes our bedroom somewhere that we want to hang out in at any time of the day.

**ND** For me, it’s important that our home doesn’t feel too ‘designed’. I prefer things to accumulate around me. I like to have plenty of art on the walls – I’ve got lots of photographs by Indian screenwriter and photographer Sooni Taraporevala, for example. Jonathan tries to get rid of some of it, but I always put it back!

**How does it feel to have won these awards?**

**ND** It’s amazing that it’s the result of 33 international editions – including ELLE Decor India! Collectively saying that we’ve made an important contribution to design. It’s a mark of having a solid, mature body of work behind you. When I was in India I could never have imagined that one day I’d win this award.

**JL** The EDIDA Designer of the Year accolade has given us lots of exposure and, hopefully, it will prompt other companies to think of collaborating with us in the future.