

PROFILE



DISTINCTIVE DESIGN THAT MATTERS **DIVISION1**

When Ali Reza Honarkar faced conservative college professors in the 1990s who emphasized the importance of honoring architecture’s past in his designs, he felt conflicted. He understood that a historical foundation was important, but young Honarkar also felt unduly confined by the approach.

It was during these formative years that his desire to stretch the limits and do things differently was born, and it’s a trait that remains central to how he and his team approach projects today at Division1 Architects in Washington, DC, which he co-founded in 1994, as a provocative response to both a failing economy and what he viewed as the stagnant design culture in the Washington metropolitan area.

“I always had to defend my work in school,” says Honarkar, laughing as he recalls instructors who perpetually questioned and dismissed his ideas. “But they did me a favor. While it frustrated me back then to have to justify my concepts, our firm’s presentations benefit today because I better anticipate the questions clients may ask, and I know how and what to present through drawings, renderings, and other visuals to communicate our team’s vision.”

While Honarkar’s desire to blaze a new path has led to an impressive scope of work, he speaks humbly about his firm’s wide-ranging accomplishments, and a conversation with him is much like sitting down with an old friend. He’s a family man, too, one whom

you’re just as likely to see coaching his son’s soccer team or watching his professional photographer wife set up a shot, as you are to find him covered in construction debris overseeing a project or collaborating with designers at his downtown DC office.

“Everyone should live a regular life,” Honarkar implores. He also says, “You can’t put time on design—you can only focus on ensuring good design, and it has to feel good. My philosophy for our team is simple: if it feels like work, don’t show up that day.” This is an approach Honarkar insists that his design team adopts while forever stretching the limits of high-quality design.

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“You can’t put time on design—you can only focus on ensuring good design, and it has to feel good.”

*– Ali Reza Honarkar, Co-founder,
Division1 Architects*



A DESIGN PHILOSOPHY EMERGES

“Our work may look simple, but it’s intrinsically sophisticated,” states Jin Yong Kim, a designer at the firm. “At first glance, you’ll likely notice clean lines, but if you step a little closer, you’ll see more.”

Indeed, seeing something deeper than what meets the eye is what you get with all the personalities at the firm, as well as the work they produce. Today, the firm’s portfolio is far-reaching, touching single-family and multi-unit residential buildings, commercial spaces ranging from offices to retail shops, restaurants and nightclubs, as well as branding and apparel.

“Every day is different, and we get just as excited about designing water bottles for a yogurt shop as we do a large condominium,” Kim says.

How Division1 goes about a project could perhaps be best characterized as ambitious or pioneering, as the firm seeks to make its mark on what it calls the staid and predictable architecture of the DC area. For example, the firm’s design team recently chose to extend a white granite surface not only across the bar at DC hotspot Barcode, but up the bordering walls and overtop the bar surface along the ceiling,

as well. This simple detail gave the functional bar a dramatic and theatrical focus. While applying granite along a wall surface isn’t new, adding it to a ceiling is unexpected, and the result is stunning.

A similar example of Honarkar’s atypical design approach occurred decades ago when he intentionally left the duct work in his remodeled city home exposed. It wasn’t something people were doing much of inside DC residences at the time. Honarkar laughs, noting that friends would visit his home, look up, and question when he was going to enclose the ducts. He never did.

Different is just what you get with Division1, and it sometimes emerges simply in how its designers utilize materials.

“When I first saw reclaimed wood, I knew I wanted to work with it, but not in the way I saw it used in New York and San Francisco,” says Honarkar. Reclaimed wood now encompasses a three-story floating wall beside a fountain at Lima, a DC restaurant and popular night club that the firm recently remodeled.

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The industrial elegance of The Lacey's back elevation is Honarkar's favorite view of the building.

"The Lacey was meant to make a statement, and that is exactly what makes it work."

*– Jeffrey Roberson, Principal,
Division1 Architects*

Speaking of materials, when asked to choose one of his current favorites, Honarkar points to Viroc, a sustainable cement composite board exported from Portugal that gives the look of thick walls of poured-in-place concrete. "It's all about using materials in ways they haven't been used before to make a bold statement," he says. The material currently appears on walls inside Lima, and was used to create a floating staircase, as well as surround a fireplace in two different DC homes. "Designing a massive fireplace with Viroc and metal changed the entire feeling of the house," says Honarkar. He adds that the fireplace also features a built-in screen that can contain the fireplace completely, transforming the piece into a work of art.

THE LACEY TRANSFORMS DC'S U STREET CORRIDOR

A distinctive design that recently earned the firm industry recognition is its work along DC's U Street corridor—an area hit hard by riots in the

1960s and subsequent neighborhood decline. But the area has undergone a rebirth, thanks, in part, to Division1's high-end, 26-unit condominium building, The Lacey. The building sits on the former parking lot of the Florida Avenue Grill, a legendary soul-food restaurant, and earned Division1 a 2012 residential architect Design Award (RADA) in the Multifamily Housing category.

Praised by RADA jury members for its transparency and industrial elegance, The Lacey's concrete walls, solid steel framework and transparent glass panels combine to create an intriguing 24,000-square-foot, four-story structure complete with an interior atrium in which hallways seem to float. The inside combines form and function. Units embrace an open plan design, providing the freedom and flexibility to facilitate better living through architecture.

When meeting with Division1 to conceptualize The Lacey's design, the Florida Avenue Grill's owner sought something different from the brick-and-mortar tenant buildings of the past.

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(Right) Sustainable elements and bright, airy spaces characterize the Church Street Property whose back elevation is shown below.



“The owner wanted this to be a forward-looking landmark—something that engaged the street,” says Jeffrey Roberson, a principal at Division1 who is based out of the firm’s New York City office. “We therefore had to come up with a building that had its own personality and stood on its own—all while showing respect to the neighborhood and its history. The Lacey was meant to make a statement, and that is exactly what makes it work.”

Division1’s work on The Lacey is an example of the firm’s versatility, as many architectural firms often concentrate either on single-family or multi-unit residential work. “No other firm our size does what we can do,” says Honarkar. “You’ll find some great designers doing modern residential work, for example, but that’s all they do. They wouldn’t be comfortable also doing a condominium like The Lacey.”

“For us, size isn’t a limiting factor because basic design is based on simple math,” echoes Roberson. “When you do larger projects, that math may turn into algebra, but it’s still just numbers.”

CHURCH STREET PROPERTY’S SUBTLE GREEN FEATURES

The Church Street Property in DC is another remarkable project that stands out as Division1’s first sustainable design. The clients asked Division1 to remodel and expand their 2,790-square-foot, early 20th century row home, converting it from a dark, fragmented series of rooms into a light, airy, and more flexible space based on a green design. Today, the home features an impressive lineup of sustainable elements.

“The final design could have earned platinum LEED status, but the clients didn’t want the attention,” says Honarkar. “They just wanted an environmentally responsible design that could contribute to the Earth in a meaningful way. The project fit Division1’s philosophy perfectly. At the end of the day, it’s all about doing things that are meaningful and make a positive impact.”

As part of the design, Division1 requested the first graywater permit for residential use in DC. Graywater, which is used household washwater, such as dish, shower, sink, and laundry water, is recycled for landscape irrigation and in toilets. Other green design elements include solar roof panels, radiant-floor heating, an energy-efficient geothermal system, and water barrels that harvest rain right from the roof for use outdoors. Combined, these

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From the building shell to interiors, and even furniture—Division One’s philosophy is to encompass every aspect, creating the total design statement.

elements create a truly sustainable result, but it’s all very subtle. What onlookers see first is a great design that also happens to be green.

“We love being the first with projects like this,” says Honarkar. “There’s great satisfaction in collaborating with our team, as well as the companies and contractors we work with to realize our designs.”

In particular, installing the home’s geothermal system proved challenging, but didn’t impede Division1’s vision for the project. “The alleyway to access the land was tight, and no residential designer had attempted anything like it in DC before,” recalls Honarkar. “But that didn’t stop us. We implemented the design successfully by working with a skilled contractor that adapted to fit a very confined space to dig the requisite 120-foot-deep holes for the ground-source heat pump used to cycle water through an underground piping loop.”

“Look at one of our projects, and you’ll know someone from our firm was involved with it every day. We don’t just turn things over to a contractor.”

– Jin Yong Kim, Designer, Division1 Architects



FIRM’S BROAD PORTFOLIO AN ASSET

In addition to its residential work, Division1 has played a significant role in DC’s hospitality industry for the past six years. The firm’s design team is currently developing a concept for a joint butcher shop/restaurant where patrons can shop and dine in one visit. Designers are also busy with plans for a Latin/Japanese fusion restaurant, as well as a site offering Americanized Vietnamese cuisine.

“Variety in our scope of work keeps our design fresh,” adds Roberson. “We often take something we learned in one industry and apply it in another to deliver an unexpected result. So what makes us unique is that when we design a house, for example, it’s far from just a residentially focused thought process.”

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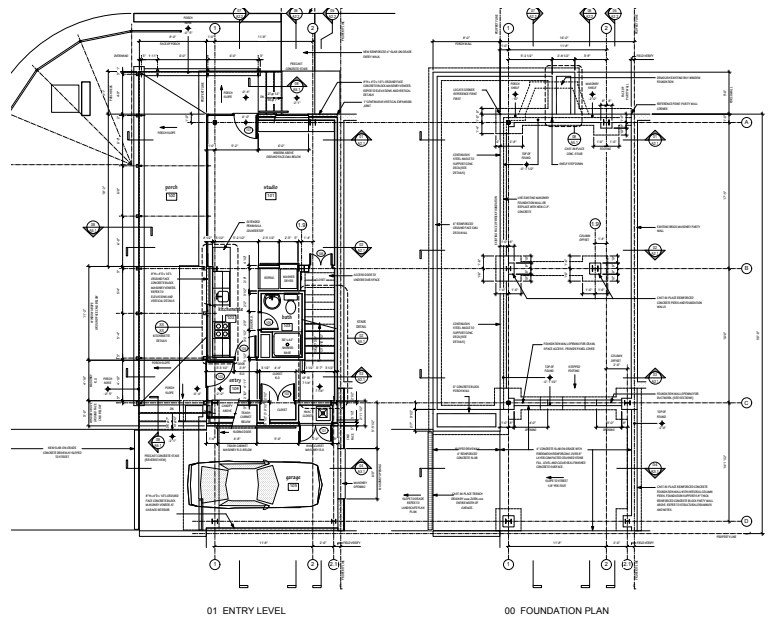
The W Street Residence interacts with the neighborhood through a skillful balance of solid massing and transparency.

DESIGNING WITH VECTORWORKS SOFTWARE

Division1 has used the Macintosh® platform since its inception and did all its drawings with the predecessor to Vectorworks® software, MiniCAD®. Today, during the design and planning phases of each project, Division1 uses Vectorworks Architect with Renderworks® to create concept studies and presentation boards. Additionally, all contract documents, including plans, elevations, sections, and details, are created with the Vectorworks platform. The firm prepares full documents for every project, regardless of its size.

“You just feel like it’s an extension of your hand—lines look like a drawing and not just lines,” says Division1 Designer Jin Yong Kim, speaking to the ease at which Vectorworks technology replaces manual drafting tools. “In the Vectorworks platform, you can just as easily draft with lines, arcs, and circles, as you can model with building objects like walls, doors, windows, roofs, and slabs.”

When asked how this process works, Kim explains that they often start by sketching on paper and then drawing the plans, sections, and elevations in Vectorworks Architect, even adding in people to get a real sense of a design’s scale. “We want what we see in our minds, on paper, and on the screen to be identical,” says Kim. “The Vectorworks platform gives us this reliable comparability.”



Division1 relies on Vectorworks Architect software to draw its plans, sections, and elevations.

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Division1's remodeling of DC hotspot Barcode yields a timeless design accented by LED lighting, brushed steel surfaces, lounge seating, and communal banquettes.

When Kim joined Division1 in 2004, he was excited to see the firm using a software tool like the Vectorworks platform, but still doing project models by hand and applying a wide variety of sources and medium to their work. Today, digital and analog worlds co-exist within Division1's walls, where Kim works cooperatively with Honarkar and other designers, sharing a passion for each project they complete.

"I get very emotional about each project," says Kim. "Look at one of our projects, and you'll know someone from our firm was involved with it every day," he says. "We don't just turn things over to a contractor."

In addition, the firm is very selective about the projects it works on, and has never had "filler" projects. Instead, everything goes into its portfolio.

"It's not about the contract fees or the size of a project," says Honarkar. "Each project matters, and we take each one seriously whether it's big or small. If we had the philosophy of just cranking out work for the simple sake of the bottom line, the firm would make more money, but I couldn't live with myself, and I wouldn't enjoy the process. Remember our philosophy: if it feels like work, don't show up."

Profiled firm:

Division1 Architects

Washington, DC, USA
202-333-4604 | info@d1-dc.com
www.d1-dc.com

New York, NY, USA
212-707-1128 | info@d1-ny.com
www.d1-ny.com

Photos:

Photos © Debi Fox Photography
www.DebiFoxPhoto.com

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DesignWorks Media
www.dwmediagroup.com

Original text and publication by:

Nemetschek Vectorworks, Inc.
7150 Riverwood Drive
Columbia, MD 21046 USA

Tel: 410-290-5114
Fax: 410-290-8050
www.vectorworks.net

U.S. sales:

888-646-4223
sales@vectorworks.net

International sales:

www.vectorworks.net/international

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