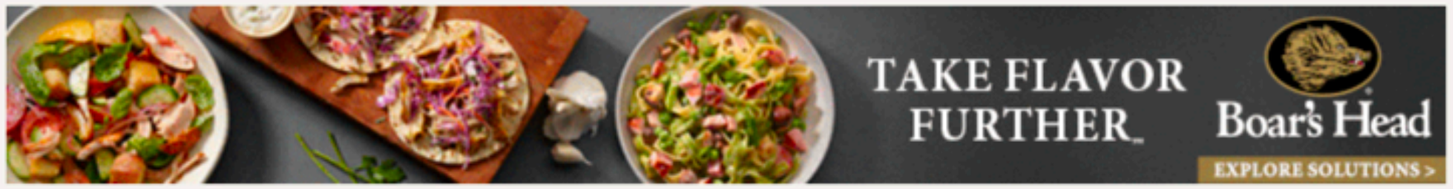
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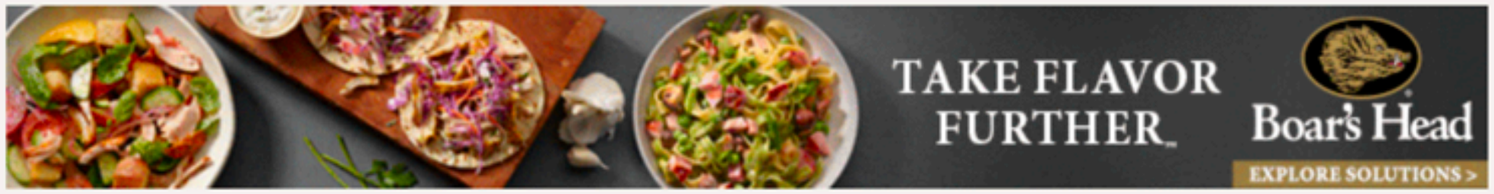
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HotelsLife Exclusive

Asia mega-project designer leads with head and heart

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By Jeff Weinstein on 11/26/2020

Now, more than ever, fresh perspectives about design aesthetics in hospitality settings are required to succeed in a COVID-informed world. For Samantha Drummond, who founded Habitus Design Group some 15 years ago, out-of-the-box thinking, as well as being a lot more sympathetic and understanding to both client and guest needs, gives her direction today.

“I’m trying to really understand what’s best for the business,” said the 52-year-old Australian, who more recently orchestrated the design of iconic integrated resorts such as Marina Bay Sands in Singapore and the just-completed luxury Solaire Resort & Casino in Manila.

“It’s not necessarily just how to make it look good. Today, I’m really thinking of it as a business, as opposed to just a pure design… Sometimes there is a lack of vision. Certain designers just do something quite beautiful, which is lovely. But it doesn’t necessarily make a lot of money for the client and it doesn’t necessarily mean longevity like a timeless space.”

With studios in Singapore, Hong Kong, Manila and her home in Odense, Denmark, where Drummond has been holed up with her son and six dogs since March, the 50-person strong team has some 24 ongoing projects with just two big clients in the Philippines and Dubai. While mainly focused on the adviser-client management side, overseeing the design and employing the talent, Drummond is also working on a few local projects: She is helping a retailer struggling to drive traffic convert some space into F&B with takeaway options, and a boutique hotelier reposition to a Four Seasons-like serviced apartment model.



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"They get to give their spaces a new identity," Drummond added. "Some developers will do that, while others, recognizing they are not getting international tourists, are repositioning for the stay-cationers. That's very much what I see happening in Europe."



"Typically, one of our resorts can have 50,000 people through in a day. How do you make them feel comfortable and secure? They have to visibly be able to see cleaners cleaning down services. It's psychological, but that has to be all transparent now." – Samantha Drummond (photo credit: Martin Kaufman)

Perhaps even more demanding, Drummond said, was learning how to homeschool her son, and she was quite surprised at how well she has adapted. She hasn't traveled since March, has taken up horseback riding, all the while becoming adept at working with clients via remote technology.

"I do a lot more upfront walkthroughs and animations for my clients," she explained. "It's my storytelling way of conveying to them when I can't be there face-to-face. So, I've had to become more clever technically, which is never a bad thing."

HOTELS spoke to Drummond in mid-November get her take on the evolution of design, as well as how changing consumer needs are driving her thinking on new projects and repositioning opportunities.

HOTELS: How are you?

Samantha Drummond: Actually, pretty good. I'm just remaining as positive as can be… I'm also more proactive. Obviously, I'm trying to put a lot more thought into what I'm doing. I still have to be a good leader to my team; I still have to be inspiring. When these things [the pandemic] happen, you really have to find your strength. You have to be resilient. Otherwise, you just don't survive these things. But it takes a lot to rattle me. I'm quite Australian like that – we're a little tough down under.

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But I'm learning to do things differently. I think it's always good to do that, no matter what age in life. You just have to think differently. I'm having to think outside the box now. I have to really think on behalf of my clients and their needs because everything's changing. Tourism is down, occupancy is down. You can't just go in and remodel a space or decorate a space without putting a tremendous amount of thought into what that is now. It's just very different.

H: How are you using your experience to guide you today?

SD: The advisory work and management is actually what's proving to be most helpful. It's everything I've learned from working on these big projects and how to look at spaces in terms of what's the best business model.

I'm trying to think a little bit more intelligently about the space and what we can do to make it as user-friendly as possible… Typically, one of our resorts can have 50,000 people through in a day. How do you make them feel comfortable and secure? They have to visibly be able to see cleaners cleaning down services. It's psychological, but that has to be all transparent now.

H: What do you think the hotel industry can do to come back as strong as ever?

SD: We have to go back to that old-fashioned thing called service. It's all going to be about the guest experience. I think if anything, only the most unique and innovative will survive this. What I would bring to the table on new projects moving forward is something that is not just timeless but something that is going to be a destination or a landmark. It takes a different thinking.

The world as we know it has changed and people will travel less. We have to be a little bit more mindful of the regional and local market and be the best that they can be. So, it's like the old saying, the fittest survive.

H: What are you advising clients who are thinking about repositioning their hotels as a result of the COVID crisis?

SD: I would look at the market and really study the location, the economy and the culture, something that people tend to overlook. Then come up with something that hasn't been done before. I think that is a formula for success. It doesn't always mean taking large financial risk and it does mean that sometimes it's quite difficult to get the client on board. But I think being innovative is risk sometimes – it's not a conventional approach to business.

H: Any advice for a hotelier that might be struggling with their public space because it was predicated on a lot of F&B and a lot of congregating?

SD: Incorporate art and engage local talent to showcase some of their works. They're providing a platform for those public spaces to become something else. They can be one thing for one month and then be something else. You have to generate interest now and these spaces must have a sense of purpose, not just decorative.



Villa at Solaire Resort & Casino in Manila

H: Where do you look for design inspiration today?

SD: I'm looking at art, culture and nature – sometimes one more than the other. The ideas usually come out of the blue. They're random, and sometimes after my second glass of red wine… It's never preplanned. I find that if I'm quite relaxed, my mind is a lot more creative. Of course, I think most people are like that.

For example, right now I'm working with a lot of indigenous local artists in the Philippines – a lot of these local village weavers and people without a name. I find that really inspiring and humbling. It's a beautiful craft and I'm enjoying watching that evolve. I've been using local craftspeople for our hotel rooms, rather than those typical hotel prints.

H: You create most often in Asia. What aesthetic works best for Asian travelers?

SD: They typically like a little bit more detailed aesthetic as opposed to the European traveler. Five-star luxury to someone in Singapore is very different to someone in London. The Asian traveler tends to like a little bit more layers, more embellishment in their interiors. There's a warmth and a richness to that interior palette. They like a lot more color. The Europeans are a little bit more pegged back with their hotel approach, particularly in Scandinavia. They would rather have white walls and very, very simple décor.

I would like to think actually moving forward that a lot of the European, the older hotels, will refurbish in a way that will appeal to a broader audience; a little bit more interior focused on the guest experience.

It's all about the way that you treat the materials. I tend to do beautiful panel systems on the walls, where I have brass inserts. It has a warmth to it. From the lighting to what we put on the walls creates a very warm and inviting room… I don't believe in overcrowding a room as there's nothing worse. To me luxury is space… Rooms also have to be interesting. I like to put artifacts, books and pieces of interest that provide a cultural identity.

H: Any changes specific to Europe, where budgets aren't quite as big?

SD: I see a lot of repurposing of existing spaces and a lot of renovation, particularly the restaurants. They're thinking of new ways to drive revenue and a lot of them are doing takeout. We had a restaurateur in Copenhagen turn the fine dining room into a burger bar. They couldn't afford to do a Michelin experience with such limited guests. It was just too difficult financially.



Chairman's Villa sitting room at Solaire Resort & Casino in Manila



"I don't have a distinct style. I do what I think is appropriate for the business and the client's needs. My job really is to interpret their vision and to try to create something that is going to be successful business for them." – Samantha Drummond (photo credit: Martin Kaufman)

H: What are the biggest mistakes being made in luxury hotel spaces?

SD: I'm not sure about the mistakes per se, but I do think that sometimes developers or designers don't necessarily think about the customer or the guest experience. A lot more effort can be made to match what the clientele needs. Often, it's maybe a lack of thought or lack of business modeling at the front end.

I don't have a distinct style. I do what I think is appropriate for the business and the client's needs. My job really is to interpret their vision and to try to create something that is going to be successful business for them. It's not necessarily about what I think looks beautiful and what I think is a wonderful thing.

H: What's your message to the hotel world, to your contemporaries about how prepare and plan for the future?

SD: I would like to see developers not lose faith and hotel brands to really strengthen. This is a good time to prove themselves, but they have to do it with the right support. The global market has to help. We all have to support each other. When I go down to shop, even if I don't need certain things from my local guys, I still buy it because it keeps them in business. I think that kind of mentality needs to happen everywhere.