PEOPLE: INTERVIEWS

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Meet the Minds: Samantha Drummond

The founder of Habitus Design Group on what drives her

Words by: Caitlin St John



Photo by Martin Kaufmann

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In the latest installment of *HD*'s Meet the Minds series, Samantha Drummond of Habitus Design Group, which operates studios in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Denmark, discusses how she began her career in the nightclub industry, making the transition to the design side of hospitality, and what she's focused on now.

Where did you grow up? Did it influence your career path?

I grew up in Melbourne. While I was still in school, my grandfather, who was well known in horse-racing circles, helped me get a part-time job at the Balaclava Hotel in St Kilda, a hotel popular with the racing fraternity. I

was instantly hooked by the hospitality sector and wanted to learn everything there was to know, so I left school to pursue my ambition fulltime and, within eight months, I was promoted to assistant manager.

What is your earliest design memory?

Several jobs later, I was working as a bar manager at a Melbourne nightclub that wasn't doing so well. Instinctively, I believed that the concept and design needed to change, and I was certain about the direction in which to go. I suggested this to the owner. He agreed and gave me free rein to implement my plan. The nightclub became an overnight success, and I discovered what I wanted to do above all in the hospitality sector—reinvent and create spaces. This early experience taught me the power of having a concept that is reflected in the design, and it has been a mantra in all my projects ever since.



Drummond worked with architect Moshe Safdie on the 2,561-room Marina Bay Sands in Singapore

Tell us about your background: first jobs, early lessons learned, etc.

After Balaclava, I went on to manage several of Melbourne's most high-profile [F&B concepts] and worked with some of the biggest names in

the entertainment and music industry. This gave me the opportunity of running after parties for celebrities such as Madonna, Sting, Prince, and Kylie Minogue. I designed and promoted cutting-edge fashion events for Melbourne's elite fashion houses and was one of the few people in the city who brought in international DJs and acts to the club scene. I loved seeing the enjoyment of the crowd when I created a successful event. By sheer chance, I had fallen into an industry that I adored. I was still so young, but I was on the Melbourne map, which felt exciting at the time.

My early years were unconventional! I found my way in a tough and fickle part of the hospitality industry, which was always challenging me to be ahead of the game. However, I increasingly realized that I wanted to focus on the design rather than operations, so I started my own design studio, Soap Design, specializing in entertainment and F&B interiors and fit out. I learned a lot about managing all the trades and overseeing our own team of contractors. It was rewarding, although quite difficult at times. Melbourne, while cosmopolitan, was small, so when I received a project opportunity in Shanghai, I didn't waste any time packing my bags. I stayed in Asia for 25 years, working on projects that were beyond my wildest dreams in terms of scale.

How would you describe your design style?

Innovative, authentic, and always moving on. Sometimes my ideas are extreme or eccentric and usually they are large in scale, but that what's needed when you are working on a building that is intended to be an icon and a gamechanger in its location. When I create a design brief, I am asking—and hopefully inspiring—the design teams to create something that's one of a kind. I'm very particular about researching ideas and finding inspiration from the locality, and we blend both local and international references in materials, art, finishes, and lighting to give projects a sense of belonging whilst still making it a luxurious and relevant experience for international travelers.I work from the broad canvas to the tiny details.



A private villa at Manila's Solaire Resort & Casino

Describe some of your current projects.

We have been working on several new spaces for the Solaire Resort & Casino Manila, a project I originally completed in 2014. These include new ultra-luxury villas for which I came up with a concept based on the silk road trade routes. Everything is carefully curated with bespoke furniture, art, and antiques, and the result is a completely different narrative and luxury experience in each villa.

We are also designing all the interiors of the new Solaire North, Manila resort, working in collaboration with Aedas Singapore. My original concept was to create a tropical oasis indoors. In a very dense urban environment, I thought it would be wonderful to transport guests as soon as they enter the front door. I had an idea to create a semi-transparent form that is nearly 100 feet to the ceiling of the atrium, which would take on a different personality at night with illumination and nature-inspired images blending with the interior landscape. We have engaged the amazing New York glass artist Nikolas Weinstein, who has taken this idea

and is creating a world-class glass sculpture, which will no doubt be the signature piece of the resort.

What architect or designer do you admire most?

I enjoyed working with Moshe Safdie on Marina Bay Sands. He was warm and collaborative, but also had strong views on the aesthetic that he wanted to express. I bonded with Moshe, his family, and his team, and they helped me understand a different perspective on interior architecture and were an inspiration to me throughout the three-year journey. Working with Moshe was often remarkable, occasionally exhausting, but always memorable in every way. He is an architect I respect on so many levels.



The atrium of the forthcoming Solaire North in Manila, shown in a rendering

What is your dream project?

In the short term, I'm very happy working on large new-build resorts. Eventually, I am sure my dream will turn to doing something utterly different—converting a historic building in rural Italy into an exclusive hotel, for example, or breathing new life into an old building to create a

standout F&B destination, along the lines of El Nacional in Barcelona and the Ned in London, or maybe cruise ship interiors, where I suspect many of the design considerations are quite similar to integrated resorts.

If you could have dinner with anyone, living or dead, who would it be? Where would you eat?

It would have to be an authentic Japanese meal in Tokyo with remarkable people from the worlds of writing, fashion, food, and the environment. Bernard Arnault or Sadhguru or David Attenborough would be perfect, and we would eat wonderful sashimi and edamame.

If you weren't in your current career, what would you be doing?

I would be growing a restaurant group across different regions of Europe, collaborating with inspirational chefs and enjoying the look on our clientele's faces as they embrace the pleasure of a special dining destination.

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