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"Design is part of my daily routine; I live
and breathe it in almost everything I do"

Samantha Drummond

Founder and managing partner, Habitus Design Group

Samantha Drummond has come a long way in her 25 year career. Here, she shares her ethos and approach to interior design with Hospitality Interiors editor, Can Faik…

Samantha Drummond has years of hospitality design experience, mainly in the gaming/entertainment industry. During this time, she has delivered some of the world's most iconic destinations, including Marina Bay Sands in Singapore. In addition to collaborating with leading design names, her own company comprises more than 50 designers, FF&E specialists and technicians.

Tell me about your role at Habitus Design Group?
Managing the client relationship is a key part of my role. Our clients are very demanding – justifiably so when they have entrusted us to help them create or enhance a very large and very luxurious resort, often in the public eye. Of course, the relationships that I nurture would not amount to much if we didn't also deliver on the design, and this part of my role I liken to conducting an orchestra: leading my own design team, and introducing and collaborating with complementary teams of architects, designers and others producing exceptional work. It is essential that I am always looking out for new inspiration and keeping my little black book of world-class chefs, talented artists, premium retail brands and so on, fresh and relevant.

What three words would you use to describe Habitus Design Group?
Visionary, dedicated and wise.

What does design mean to you?
Design is part of my daily routine; I live and breathe it in almost everything I do. I believe that an essential part of design is taste, and that we have an important role as hospitality design advisers to help clients express this. For our clients' guests, design is an opportunity to create a stage for living a charmed life. We aim to craft experiences that make guests feel glamorous, important and cherished.

Do designers think about loyalty when they design a hotel or is it just an operator's concern?
Absolutely, designers think about loyalty when they are designing a hotel! If you create the right ambience and this is combined with incredible food and great service, guests will come back. They will also become advocates for your hotel when they return home and tell family and friends all about their experience.

Actually, I think this is a fascinating issue for designers to tackle since it means thinking about how people make both intuitive and cognitive decisions, the spaces guests will want to retreat into or stand out in, the best relationships between spaces to help the guest journey, and, of course, how to make wonderful memories.

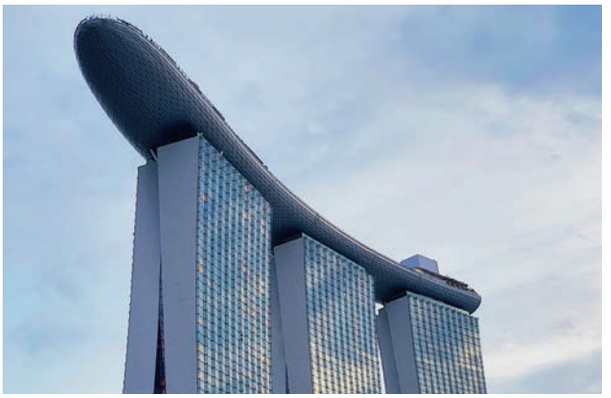
How high on the list is revenue creation for designers?
To my mind, if you are designing a commercial development (as opposed to a private home) there is simply no point in creating a beautiful space if it doesn't make money and I enjoy developing the business model as part of our design process. Our role is to ensure the projects we design are revenue generating, and there is a methodology to achieving this when planning such aspects as programme of areas, adjacencies and travel distances. For large resort projects, it is key to activate the guest journey appropriately from arrival to guestroom; every space needs to work together as an overall experience but there is a huge audience and there needs to be something for everyone. All projects, large or small, have to excite the senses and encourage guests to stay and spend their money where they are.

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What do you think will be the biggest change in how you do your job post-COVID-19?
Ultimately, I believe we will become more efficient and effective working remotely. We will learn new digital techniques to help express our creativity and our presentations will develop in such a way that we can capture emotions and convey our storytelling virtually as well as we can face-to-face. I also think clients will come to like this approach because it will save both time and cost.

With Social media, especially Instagram, becoming an increasingly important marketing tool for hotels. What are your thoughts on this, and do you take this into account when designing spaces?
I realise that I now take the power of social media for granted – both how it can influence and how it can inspire our designs. Social media has become a fundamental tool for us to convey our ethos, showcase our teams' talents and express our creativity, and it has been a catalyst to an increased focus on the smaller details of a design. Everyone is taking more photos now and the tiniest of details can capture the imagination and appear on Instagram.

How can design be used to manage the guest's experience
I believe that it's the unexpected surprises that are so influential in the guest experience. In the guestroom this might be an item such as an antique jewel box re-crafted into the mini bar or a clever, simple-to-use and tastefully designed room control system or the most marvellous bed. Downstairs, there might be a lounge with a collection of the most cleverly illustrated books and, everywhere, lighting is very important. Bespoke art and accessories have the power to add layers of meaning to the experience.









How important are public spaces in hotels? Are there ways in which you've used innovative design in these areas to facilitate innovative usage?

They are incredibly important, today more than ever in hotels of almost all types. In our case, we are dealing with large voluminous public spaces, and they need a certain articulation and 'wow' to them. We use natural and artificial light to optimise the architectural form and the interior aesthetic, we design corridors to lead the eye on to the next space, and we always aim to introduce incredible art.

At Marina Bay Sands in Singapore, our retail mall was so vast (some 800,000 sq ft) that it was critical to ensure we had regular nodes of interest. Art, an ice-skating rink, floating F&B pavilions, views through glazed walls in corridors to ensure no dead ends and many other features were included to achieve this. In retail there is a method to the circulation and levels which you have to consider in order to retain visitors' interest on the long journey and encourage them to explore multiple floors. Having anchor tenants in strategic locations is also very much key to the success of a large mall.



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With so many hospitality designers in the industry, how does Habitus Design Group stand out from the rest?

Well, I think our work speaks for us. Projects like Marina Bay Sands and Solaire Resort & Casino in Manila, for both of which I led the design management, are extraordinary in their scale and vision. It's important to provide the right formula for our clients both in the design and the management, and the coordination efforts are tremendous to get the execution just right. I think we know how to work with clients who want the very best for their resort and, while I am inspired by large spaces, which are the ultimate blank canvas, I also love to pour time and effort into the details. Our integrated resorts are essentially multiple projects within one huge development, so our approach holds good for all manner and scale of hotels and resorts.

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Do you have a most memorable experience with interior design; something you saw that changed or inspired you?
I remember when the Setai Miami opened around 2004, I thought at the time that the interiors were the perfect combination of east meets west. I found this very inspiring and now love to work with this type of aesthetic.

Do you have any architects or designers you admire?
Among Asian based architects, I particularly admire the work of Jean Michel Gathy - his approach to tropical resort design is very special - and I also admire Henning Larsen from Denmark. Although they are both architects, there is a beauty in their architectural interior treatments and lighting. I really like the simplicity of Scandinavian pared-back design but also the warmth in tropical design from Asia, and going back to my original muse of the Setai Miami, I find something new is formed when the two design cultures are brought together.

What would be your dream hotel project?
A resort hotel in a remote mountain location in Europe.

Marina Bay Sands is probably the most iconic integrated resort in the world. What exactly was your role in its delivery?
I was one of five key decision makers. My scope was to oversee and manage all design aspects of the project build including celebrity chefs, famous artists and luxury fashion house brands, and my role encompassed the identification and engagement of the most appropriate and talented teams of designers. In leading the design management effort, I was responsible for overseeing the collaboration between the design teams, which included countless workshops where we exchanged ideas with the lead architect, Moshe Safdie, and Aedas from Singapore. We were working with some of the best consultants in the world and it was my job to provide the design direction to ensure the client's expectations were surpassed, budgets were met and the highest quality finishes were achieved.

You are credited in introducing luxury retail brands to the Philippines in your Solaire Manila project. How did you persuade them to take the leap?
It is true that at the time of this project, Manila wasn't seen as a leading market for luxury branded retail. Nevertheless, our client's vision was for the first five-star luxury integrated resort in the Philippines and he has impeccable taste. So, I used my contacts to bring different brands to our project and I collaborated with a well-known local retail agent who had relationships with some other fashion houses. I then travelled to Singapore and Hong Kong to pitch our resort to the senior executives of some of these brands. Happily, I succeeded; they took a chance and placed their stores in our mall. It has proved to be very successful.

You like to work with world-famous artists in creating original artworks for your projects. Please tell us about one or two of your particularly memorable experiences
I was very lucky with Las Vegas Sands (owner of Marina Bay Sands) as they had the brand recognition and budget that allowed us to engage such established artists such as Ned Khan, Antony Gormley, Anish Kapoor, James Carpenter and ChongBin Zheng, to name but a few. Working closely with these artists and Moshe Safdie was vital to achieving the right balance of creativity and commercial sensibility for huge volume spaces. ›





Currently we are designing a large vertically integrated resort in the Philippines and it has a 30-meter tall atrium. We wanted to introduce an element of 'wow' and I had a concept in mind for a reflective glass sculpture that transitions up through the space. I contacted a celebrated artist out of New York; he loved the idea and is now creating the piece in collaboration with Aedas who have designed a stunning architectural space.

What's next for you and the studio?

Despite the global shock of the pandemic this year, we are cautiously optimistic and are seeing our pipeline of work returning to life. The hospitality industry will rebound, and even in the likely event of it taking several years to reach the pre-Covid level of travel, developers and owners will use the interlude to build and refurbish in readiness for a full return of customers.

A lot of developers and hospitality investors around the world are looking at how to reinvent their properties to ensure a safe and healthy environment for their clientele whilst still offering a unique experience and making guests feel secure. So, a renewed focus for us will be on the design advisory side, taking a creative approach and exploring ideas to ensure that new customer experiences are developed at the same time as revenue is generated. Reinvention is to be embraced. Many business models have been adversely affected by the pandemic, but this is an opportunity for transformation. I am enjoying the challenge of creating new experiences and the prospect of a totally different approach to hospitality design from what we have known.

We have just established an office in Central Hong Kong which is perfectly located to serve our Macau and Hong Kong clients and allows our team there to give a very personal and time sensitive service to clients in that region. We will also be working on what will be a stunning tropical resort in Asia, located on a pristine beach frontage. The resort will feature beautifully appointed rooms, a luxurious spa and a wide range of F&B. I am thrilled with the location and scale and I'm really looking forward to creating a world class resort with a visionary client.

> "I believe that it's the unexpected surprises that are so influential in the guest experience"

In addition, the unusual experience for me of having months at home in Denmark has meant an opportunity to think more about approaching the European hospitality marketplace and to touch base with developers here and start looking at some very interesting opportunities. In fact, I have just started working with one of the larger property developers in Denmark, helping to shape new concepts for his hospitality projects. Currently, we are conceptualising an idea for a new restaurant/lounge bar in Copenhagen, the first of many.

Lastly, share some good news! Have you done anything to stay busy in these crazy times?

Well, with six dogs, one young son and 10 chickens, I've been pretty busy – lots of walks, football in the garden and collecting wonderfully fresh, organic eggs – and I've enjoyed the chance for quality time with my family. Mind you, it didn't really quieten down for us work-wise since we were completing a luxury integrated resort in the Philippines and even designing social distancing screens for gaming and entertainment areas. Also, it's been an interesting time to learn new skills, in particular the way we present to clients from remote locations.

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