

FACE TO FACE

In a special feature exclusive to SPACE, Rick Evans, President, SLH, conducts an interview with Therese Virserius, Founder, Virserius Studio..



Rick Evans knows the hospitality industry well. In fact, presiding over Samuel Lawrence Hospitality (SLH) – a company that is internationally renowned for its custom-produced case goods and seating, it goes without saying that Rick and the team at SLH have a range of experience when deciding what’s important in the design of a hotel. He talks to Therese Virserius – Founder and one half of the Swedish-sister-design-duo that makes up Virserius Studio (along with their talented teams in New York and Paris) – about projects, past and present, for a unique insight into design within the hospitality industry.

RICK: If you were designing two hotels to be built five years from now, where would you start the research and build the first concept – one hotel being a resort in a destination area, the second being in a major city re positioning an existing building?

THERESE: I would first find an unexpected destination, perhaps somewhere remote. My research would involve trying to find ways to add elements of social consciousness with the design with proceeds going to a local project or endeavor. With repositioning in a major city, the design would have to be really connected to the city, enabling an authentic experience versus merely being cool. For our project at the Biltmore, a Waldorf Astoria Resort in Scottsdale, Arizona, we are honouring Frank Lloyd Wright’s stunning architecture but also adding elements that represent Scottsdale today. We want to encourage deeper exploration of the city and for the space to be one where guests can really interact with each other.

RICK: What are the three things that are missing in today’s hotel room designs?

THERESE: A lot of hotels are still very predictable in the way they use space. They lack originality, the age of the building often dictates different factors, like budget and other restrictions.





Big Easy, Durban

RICK: What materials would you like to find to use in the new room designs and why? How can furniture manufacturers help you find new materials and products?

THERESE: We would ensure that the rooms had sustainable and durable materials that stand the tests of time and wear. As outdoor furniture designers ourselves, we are always looking for innovative materials and products to use. We'd like to see more natural materials being reintroduced to the market such as cane and rattan. The problem is that they often don't withstand heavy everyday use, but they do add the authentic charm that we are all striving to achieve. I personally like materials that age gracefully, as they lend character to a space. Materials that will get a nice patina over time.

RICK: How do you and your sister, Regina, collaborate on hotel and commercial projects?

THERESE: We meet with the clients to get a whole vision of the project. We assess their needs and wants, and then we discuss the project internally. Regina does the more academic, historic and artistic research, while I analyse the space and how people are currently using it. Then we work with

our team to craft the story. Designing, to me, is like theater; we set the stage and how the players, or guests, will move within the space.

RICK: You have been designing spaces for over 15 years. What would you say is your greatest achievement and, if you can go back in time, is there anything you would change?

THERESE: My greatest achievement has been my firm that I built from scratch in New York City, a completely different place and culture than where I came from. It was not easy at all. I had to pick myself up when I fell to continue on this path I set for myself. I knew it was going to succeed and then it did, we began to grow, landing more and more amazing and award-winning projects and then opening an office in Europe as we expanded globally. I am proud of it all, and don't take it for granted.

If I could change one thing, I probably would have stayed a bit longer with another firm before starting my own. That would have been better, I believe, but ultimately it goes back to my personality because I had a lot of energy and was anxious to explore and challenge myself. That's more of a challenge when working for another firm, versus running your own.



RICK: Who is your favourite artist, architect or designer and why?

THERESE: My favourite architect is Zaha Hadid. To be such a strong woman presence in a male-dominated field is quite admirable. She left a big hole, and we need to fill it. I remember being 18 years old and flying to Hong Kong for the first time and I saw her paintings and part of Victoria Peak was still under construction. I didn't fully grasp the paintings, but I do remember that they moved me. She was way before her time, absolutely brilliant.

RICK: You travel the world monthly. What part of the world do you want to visit and design for that you haven't been to and why?

THERESE: I would love to do something in India like a repositioning of an old palace. India has such a rich culture that I would welcome the opportunity to explore even further. Morocco and Jordan are also fascinating places to me.

RICK: Do you have a behind-the-scenes story that you would like to tell that hasn't been told?

THERESE: When I was 24 years old I was invited to Shanghai by Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of IKEA, to open their first retail shop in China. They had a rigorous interviewing process for the position and due to the vast language skills we all possessed, one of the questions they asked was whether I would rather work for the United Nations or for IKEA. I looked at

them and said, "well the United Nations, of course" but then...off to Shanghai I went for three years! Who knows where I would have been today if IKEA had decided that wasn't the right answer for them? Instead, they saw that spirit in me and knew that I was going to do something big so that was the kind of person they wanted on their team. I think it speaks to vision and taking chances, which is what design is all about, right?

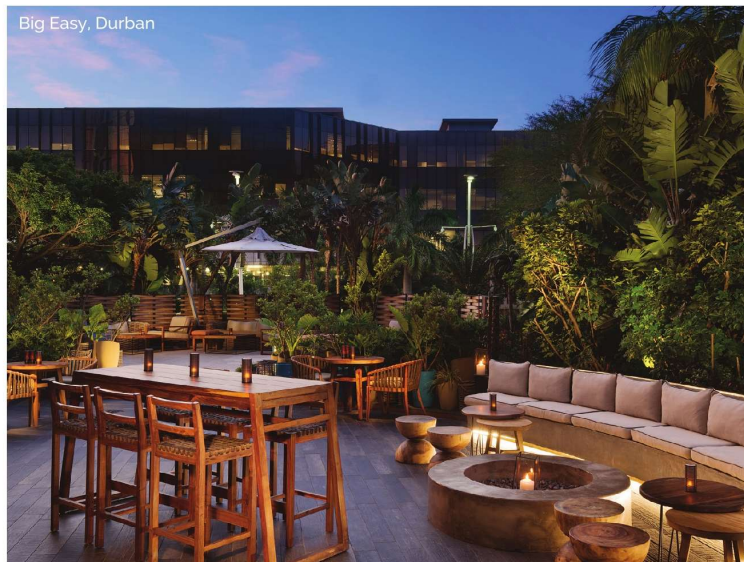
RICK: What is the future of hotel interior design?

THERESE: We touched a bit on this before, but the importance of the environment and sustainability cannot be overstated. People are more informed than ever and are interested in minimising their environmental footprint. Designers must make even more considerations when creating spaces; for example, we at V/S have been incorporating building materials that mimic elements that clean the pollutants in the air. It is not just talking the talk with design but really backing it up, as we will be held to task.

The future of hotel design will continue to incorporate more and more technology so you will see apps that will allow you to check in quickly and conveniently, and even open your door. Finally, authenticity is becoming more and more important for hotel guests. People want to have a more genuine experience, connecting to the cultural and historical heritage of a place.



W Atlanta Midtown



Big Easy, Durban

RICK: For designers that have been working in the field for five to ten years, where should they look for their next level of growth?

THERESE: Honestly it all depends on the personality – what drives you and makes you tick. However, and this is something I insist upon, travel is key. You must experience different cultures, take in and appreciate their foods, their architecture, their patterns and how they live their everyday lives and approach different things. Travel enriches the mind and allows you to think in a more robust way. It evokes curiosity and patience, which is what we so desperately need in this world.

RICK: Where will you be living and working in ten years?

THERESE: I'll still be travelling back and forth between Paris and NY but also spending more and more time in the countryside in both France and the US.

Keep up with the latest news from both SLH and Virserius Studio at:

www.slh-co.com

www.virseriusstudio.com