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MKV DESIGN

MARIA VAFIADIS, FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR

MKV's Founder and Managing Director, Maria Vafiadis, talks in-depth to SPACE Editor Can Faik about the spectacular projects the company has completed and what the future holds under her leadership...

MKV Design packs a punch way above its weight. From a studio in London's Whitechapel, the 20-person team has delivered award-winning hospitality, as well as residential, projects on three continents, each one unique but every one of the projects beyond the expected. The boutique nature of the firm means that its culture of ingenuity, thoughtfulness and pragmatism permeates every project; it also means that Founder and Managing Director, Maria Vafiadis, is involved in every phase of the work.

Tell me about your role at MKV Design

I founded MKV Design exactly 20 years ago and since then we have been privileged to work on extraordinary hotel, resort and spa projects across Europe, in the Gulf and in South Africa. However, we remain a small practice, which means I am involved in all our projects. I have a great team, many of whom have worked at MKV for a long time, so it is a joy to work collaboratively together – and to share some of the travel with them! However, I find that most of our clients expect to see and hear from me regularly, partly because our relationship has been built up over many years across several projects.

So that's what I do, but I would also describe my role as

being to dream on behalf of our clients. I believe that dreamers can make things happen and, when they do, they create legacies. The inspiration for my dreaming comes from all sorts of experiences, learning, sights and sounds. I am interested in emerging ideas and when something intrigues me, I like to explore it in my mind. Sometimes, this process crystallises into the entire creative framework for a project, or a space planning solution or small details which elevate the design to something more extraordinary.

What five words would you use to describe MKV Design?

Instinctively individual, beyond trend, and thoughtful

What makes MKV Design different to other design companies?

Well, we are certainly a boutique practice that has proved we can deliver on very large and complex hospitality projects and with a quality and depth that serves the test of time. Ten years ago, we completed the first phase of Costa Navarino, a new resort in the Peloponnese that included two luxury hotels, a large standalone spa, two golf courses and clubhouse, 20 dining venues and a village, and we are now working on phase two. A year ago, we completed the recreation of the legendary Bürgenstock Resort in Switzerland encompassing hotels, restaurants, residences and possibly Europe's largest spa. >





The Palm Court, Sheraton Grand Park Lane

How and why did you get into the interior design industry?

I qualified as an architect but chose to work as an interior designer from day one. More than that, I decided to specialise in hotel design. Back then, it was considered much less exciting than other design sectors – with some justification. However, and maybe this was the Greek in me, I immediately engaged with the possibilities of hotel design. The large canvas, the international culture and the business of providing hospitality all fascinated me. Today, of course, the pendulum has swung and hospitality design is seen as the incubator of some of our best societal ideas.

How would you define your 'Hotel Style'?

We don't have a 'Hotel Style'. We are as confident in re-imagining soaring spaces as we are in creating introverted niches and I hope that you would never walk into a hotel designed by MKV and think you had been there before, in another part of the world. We believe that luxury hospitality design should be like haute couture, each place made-to-measure so that it uniquely belongs in its location and engages guests' senses, emotions and intellectual curiosity.

What does design mean to you?

The creation of places that make everyone who passes through them feel good about themselves.

How important are public spaces in hotels?

For most hotels, public spaces are very important, and becoming more so. Many of us live in a digitally isolated world and are forgetting how to engage with one another, even how to engage with ourselves. Hotels have an

opportunity to unlock this by using their public spaces rather like the old village square where neighbours and strangers can come together to share in an experience. I heard with interest recently about a report commissioned by the BBC called The Surprising Benefits of Talking to Strangers which highlighted the potential of improved happiness and wellbeing by doing just that. And where better to talk to strangers than in a hotel?

Have you seen exceptional growth in any part of the world in hotel design?

Growth is everywhere in the world of hotel design. It is a fast-evolving scene.

What has been your favourite project to date?

I like complex projects, so I would have to say that it's Bürgenstock Resort and Costa Navarino. In the case of Bürgenstock, the challenge was to recreate the legacy in a way that would take it forward into the next 50 years, whereas, for Costa Navarino, we were creating a new resort so we had to define a new and authentic narrative.

As one who's steeped in hospitality design, what do you find yourself always on the lookout for as you step into a new hotel?

Simply, how it makes me feel.

What do you want in a hotel room?

Considered luxury. I am very concerned about the future of our planet and conscious of the waste that hotels generate. The hotel guestroom is a good place to start improving on this – it's here that guests are most likely to have time by themselves to look at what's around them and wonder about the choices that have been made. So, I would like locally sourced, organic



The Spa, Matild Palace, a luxury Collection Hotel

toiletries in dispensers that can be re-filled, not plastic bottles; a chill water machine with a recyclable cup that I can use throughout my stay, but no minibar – fresh fruit is fine instead of packaged snacks – and a limit to pieces of paper advertising things. I would also like glazed doors that lead onto a large terrace so that the breeze can cool my room rather than A/C; a natural mattress and bed linen, locally crafted and/or recycled furniture and fittings; and a thoughtful approach to energy consumption in general.

Let's imagine for a moment: if you had to design a hotel for MKV Design, what would it be like?

I believe that there's a gap in the hotel marketplace. We have a growing niche that is medical hotel and spa for people who want specialist medical treatments and we have hotels with a percentage of accessible guestrooms and public areas for guests with significant mobility issues. But what about the segment of our society who are healthy, have zest for life but are, say, a little less mobile because they are older? Many of these people are in their prime of life financially, they are young at heart and they crave the quality of experience they have enjoyed over the years. I would love to design an MKV hotel that targeted this type of guest. I think it would be a first.

Where do you see hotel design in the future?

There is a really interesting scenario developing at the moment. On the one hand, we have increasing convergence with hybrids offering combinations of hotel, members club, private lounges, public restaurants and coworking spaces. We see hospitality design increasingly integrated into workplaces, co-living developments and private medical centres. Hotels are stepping up their public spaces, in part to offer the service that's missing in Airbnb –

social interaction - and long-stay apartment providers are realising that they need a differentiator and that can be design. Eventually all of this will coalesce into the mainstream as the major international brands either replicate or acquire the parts they want. But then, I am sure, new individual hotel models will emerge and the cycle will begin all over again.

What is the biggest thing the company has learnt over its years in the industry?

The pleasure of growing with our clients and learning from one another.

Is there anything exciting that you are working on at the moment that you can tell us about?

We are nearing completion on Matild Palace in Budapest which will be the first Luxury Collection Hotel Hungary. The palatial neo-baroque property has been a Budapest landmark on the gateway to Elisabeth Bridge over the Danube ever since it was completed in 1902 under the patronage of Princess Clotilde of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. It was designed as an apartment building with a grand café at street level that soon became a destination for artists from around Europe.

In finding new life for Matild, we were very conscious of old meanings, in the building and in the culture of the city. On the ground floor, we have reinvented the café as a contemporary destination with the glamour of its predecessor and introduced a new brasserie. Decorated in the famous Zsolnay porcelain tiles and zoned with a shop, bar and series of kitchen stations, the brasserie will serve different local foods like the city's popular market stalls. We have re-configured the internal plan from the first floor upwards to create 130 jewel-like bedrooms and suites with bathrooms

designed as private spas; the fabulous presidential suite could be the apartment of Princess Clotilde herself! The spa celebrates Hungary's tradition of thermal bathing and there will be a sky bar – a 'secret' glass room on the rooftop with an outdoor terrace.

What would you say are the three best places you've ever stayed?

Venice in winter when mist holds the islands in an eerie grip; Amangiri near the Grand Canyon where the architecture of the buildings morph into the stark beauty of the prehistoric rocks and you feel completely connected with the landscape; and Mykonos, where I enjoy my favourite beach, listening to the waves and feeling at home.

What's next for you?

A book, I hope.

And is there anywhere in the world you particularly like to work in ?

Italy would be wonderful. I studied and worked in Milan and speak Italian, and the entire country is a hospitality designer's dream. North Africa also,

which has such fascinating histories and wide landscapes to design with. But then, we would also love to do more work in London and other multi-cultural and historic cities.

Let's finish with the issue of personal and work life balance. How do you aim to achieve a good balance and what do those closest to you think of your attempts?

Actually, I heard recently that we don't talk about work life balance anymore; it's just called "living", which is a relief to me since I don't think I was ever too good at finding a balance! Like most international hospitality designers, I travel a lot, have exhausting site visits and client meetings at all hours. Fortunately, I have an understanding family. I do make time for pampering spa days, and, when I can, I travel back to Greece to soak up simple pleasures and gather with friends over long and very sociable late-night dinners.

www.mkvdesign.com



Deluxe Bathroom, Bürgenstock Hotel