



From Jumby Bay, a private island resort off Antigua, to The Wellesley Hotel in Knightsbridge, Dennis Irvine has delivered every manner of luxury hospitality project worldwide. Here, Dennis talks about his early design influences, the satisfaction of running his own studio, and his top interior spaces from across the globe.

Q&A: Dennis Irvine, Dennis Irvine Studio

How did you forge a career in the industry, and what was it that first drew you to the world of design?

I was fascinated by design long before I realised that I could study or be able to pursue it as a profession. From an early age I developed a curiosity of design due to my transient lifestyle. My father was an army officer so we lived in lots of different places around Europe as well as in further flung locations including Kenya, Brunei and Hong Kong.

This exposure to different cultures, art, structures and spaces developed my understanding and empathy of built environments. I was always more creative than academic at school and I would be usually found in the art studio or the wood workshop on the lathe creating all manner of things.

My formal education culminated in a degree in interior architecture which I really enjoyed and would recommend to anyone interested in the formation and design of interior spaces.

Who was inspirational to you early in your career, and why?

Initially I worked for exhibition and retail design companies including MET, a studio which has always been known to have an experimental culture. I was then interviewed by Mary Fox-Linton for a short freelance contract to complete the designs for a Russian oligarch's residence.

I worked with Mary for 15 years and she was a true inspiration. Having worked in the industry for such a long time, her knowledge base and intuitive approach to design and how it evolved was second to none.

She really made me and the team think about things in an unexpected way. Her design was never predictable and that's what I continually strive for now.

What would you say has been the biggest challenge for you in your career so far?

Setting up a studio in my own right and knowing that all of the bucks ultimately stop with me. It's challenging but exhilarating, stressful but satisfying and all at the same time.

The greatest challenge of all is getting the right team together. Design is very much about the right chemistry, between fellow designers, with clients and, vitally importantly, with the spaces we work in, so empathy is key.

What is your proudest achievement, as a designer, to date?

The first project we have completed in my name – Jumby Bay, a Rosewood Resort located just off the coast of Antigua. I was given a great deal of freedom to interpret spaces as I felt they should be, taking

inspiration from the former plantation house's rich history, the verdant landscape and the island's traditions.

We commissioned local artists including Dina Debozzi for trompe l'oeil island scenes for the Blue Room; hand-crafted furnishings in ebony, teak, rattan and wicker from specialist manufacturers; bespoke lighting that features nods to the building's past, and locally-grown tropical plants for the terraces and open spaces.

Our design concept was the modern interpretation of the Colonial spirit and we believe we have created engaging, memorable environments that Jumby Bay's owners and guests are going to enjoy and cherish.

What do you feel have been the most important creative developments in hospitality design over the last 15 years or so, and looking forward, what challenges will designers need to create solutions for?

Hospitality design, particularly for luxury brands, is about creating spaces that demonstrate

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understanding of the local culture. This can only be achieved when designers immerse themselves in the heritage of the location as well as its current environs and future aspirations. So, increasingly, designers need also to be historians, news analysts and futurologists.

People will continue to expect more experiences from hotels and designers need to be able to take a more holistic approach to respond to their demands.

Describe your top three interior spaces, from anywhere in the world, and why they resonate with you?

The Pullman Hotel in Lijiang, China. The considered design means that the open spaces and vistas to the snowcapped mountains are perfectly framed from all angles.

I love the monolithic structure of Battersea Power Station. Gilbert Scott's unique imposing design is truly an icon of British architecture.

My parents' house in Oxfordshire. It's full of

objects that they collected on their travels around the world. Seeing and touching them immediately takes me back to other places and times in my life and all the wonderfully evocative memories that come with them.

If you were to design a hotel with a restaurant and a bar from the ground up – what would be the defining elements?

Views – over South American rainforests would be perfect, with a cobalt lagoon

Honesty – should be built by craftsmen using local materials translating the site's history with modern amenities

Technology – there should be absolutely none
F&B – everything should be locally sourced, if it's not available nearby you can't have it

Dresscode – shorts and flip flops should be de rigueur

Size – no more than 30 guests and family friendly

Location – accessible only by boat

The defining elements of my perfect hotel are always comfort first and style second. Design should support this and not lead it. In the words of Coco Chanel “Luxury must be comfortable, otherwise it is not luxury.”

Have you got any hospitality projects in the pipeline that you're able to share with us?

I am involved in a very large project at Langley Park, which was once the Duke of Marlborough's hunting lodge. It will be a country house hotel nestled within 12 hectares of park and woodland west of Iver Heath, England.

It comprises two separate buildings, the main one being a Grade II Listed 18th century Palladian mansion with original features. This will be home to elegant public areas and guest rooms including a presidential suite. The second building is the independently-located Brew House with guest rooms and a heritage exhibit.

Due to open in 2018, the design will encompass modern sensibilities and aspirations with an understated residential aesthetic. The palette will echo the seasons – soft hues, saturated coloured fabrics and subtle references to location and nature.

What do you like to do with your downtime?

I don't get a lot of it if I'm honest. Not that I'm complaining, I am extremely fortunate to have a job I am passionate about and to work with a great team and clients who are responsive to my ideas, even when they are very different from what they had envisaged. When I do occasionally switch off I am usually either with family or friends or sleeping.

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