

DRIVEN BY *DETAIL*

AN APPRECIATION FOR THE FINER DETAILS CAN BE SEEN IN EVERY PROJECT THAT MANAGING DIRECTOR OF DAVID GRACE DESIGNS INTERNATIONAL GRACE SOH UNDERTAKES.

WORDS JENNIFER SIJNJA • IMAGES DAVID GRACE DESIGNS INTERNATIONAL

Grace Soh has a knack for understanding the importance of details. “Small touches can make or break the project,” she says. “We focus on seemingly imperceptible details to transform a good design to one that is great.” She has a reputation of being meticulous among friends and peers by now – a quality she consistently displays daily in her role as Managing Director of David Grace Designs International (DGDI), the design firm she established in 2012 after being encouraged by family, friends and clients to start her own business.

Undertaking projects predominantly in the global hospitality industry, DGDI also takes on health care, government and commercial projects, and demonstrates an unflinching respect for certain characteristics that make each space unique. The team pays close attention to each project’s environment and local culture to develop bespoke interiors in harmony with their surroundings.

Grace dates her interest in interior design back to when she was young when her mother would point to elements of »



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beauty in hotels and opulent homes, and she has continued ever since to take inspiration from her mother's heightened sense of aesthetics. Grace attended the Hornsey College of Art in London, and upon graduating she went on to work for Bent Severin & Associates, becoming a managing partner after nine years.

While at Bent Severin, Grace worked on hotels, hospitals, and commercial and residential complexes in various countries across Asia, including China, Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Singapore. She worked on notable buildings, including the Istana, a Singaporean national monument and the official residence of Singapore's president, set on a 43-hectare estate.

Her first experience designing projects in the healthcare industry came when Bent Severin was entrusted with the interior design of Singapore's Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. The general and acute care

hospital in Yishun, in the north of Singapore, has over 600 beds and serves a population of more than 700,000 people.

"When we had the chance to design the Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, we wanted to make sure that it was as welcoming as possible," she recalls.

Completed in June 2010, the hospital is often referred to as a 'medical Shangri-La'. Boasting a garden courtyard and planter boxes lining the wards, its celebration of the natural world was awarded the inaugural Stephen R Kellert Biophilic Design Award in November 2017. Since its completion, the hospital has garnered a wide range of other awards that recognise innovative designs that transform hospitals into restful and healing environments.

Grace recalls the client "specifically asked for designers who had no experience designing a hospital", and says, "I can see why: because they wanted to have a clean slate to rewrite the narrative." During the project, she drew on her own experience of her mother's extensive periods of illness when she was a child growing up. "Visiting hospitals, for me, was a traumatic experience," she remembers.



Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, Singapore, B1 ward.

"When we had the chance to design the Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, we wanted to make sure that it was as welcoming as possible."

"During the brainstorming process of this hospital's design, we wanted to make sure that it was as welcoming as possible to give both patients and visitors alike peace of mind and, more importantly, a hope that things would turn out for the better."

Grace and her team used their selection of materials and colours to craft an atmosphere of tranquility, and she remembers moments during the process when they attempted to make a contribution beyond their remit, joking about installing screens showing humorous silent movies on a loop, to cheer up the patients.

"Laughter," she says, "and a merry heart is the best medicine." Small details about the user experience of the space allow Grace to take a holistic approach to the needs of the particular space she is working on. She clearly gained much from the experience, but acknowledges that "the scale of healthcare is significant, so it takes up a lot of your time". »

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She adds, “While you can do three or four hotels at one time, you can only do one hospital.”

Grace’s extensive experience in hospital design has contributed significantly in the reshaping the future of healthcare design. However, Grace says, “We prefer to concentrate on hotels and resorts, given our 30 years of experience in the hospitality industry. We have had many requests to bid for healthcare facilities, villas and other commercial buildings but, ultimately, our hearts are still with hotels and resorts.

“They are exciting, with fast-paced time lines compared with hospitals. With our wealth of experience in the hospitality industry, we feel that we can add substantial value to the hotel and resort projects more effectively. In hospitality design, the demand for fresh and cutting-edge concepts is a challenge we thrive on. Our years of experience have equipped us with the ability to manage projects with a quick turnaround while meeting the high standards of clients.”

Notable projects undertaken by DGDI include the Villa Song, nestled next to the Saigon River in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; the Flutes restaurant at the National Museum of Singapore; and the five-star Sedona Hotel that sits on 3.2 hectares of manicured gardens in Yangon, Myanmar. DGDI is now working on a waterfront integrated project in Colombo, Sri Lanka, called Cinnamon Life, which Grace notes is the city’s most anticipated integrated development; and on the renovation of two iconic luxury hotels for The Raffles in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.



1. Raffles Beijing (currently known as Beijing Hotel NUO), lobby.
 2. Raffles Makati, Manila, Presidential Suite, bedroom.
 3. Villa Song, Ho Chi Minh City, pool.

The team at DGDI do luxury well, reflecting Grace’s impeccable attention to detail. She considers interior designers to be detail-oriented people: “My team are constantly crossing dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s,” she notes, and is quick to admit that she keeps a close eye on every aspect of every project. “In my own discreet way, I am constantly hands-on, checking most of the work, because we run an incredibly detailed operation.”

She offers another illustration of how small details contribute to the bigger picture of elegance. “If you invite someone to your home for dinner, you make sure the napkins are all matching; the decorations do not need to be too rich – you don’t need a candelabra – but you should at least have a nice tea light. All these little touches make a difference.” »

Warming to her theme, she continues, “In the old days, we used to look up to the French. They would be walking the streets with a sense of style about them. When you compare them to other people running around in flip-flops and shorts, this style becomes exceptionally important. The little things add up.”

It goes without saying that brainstorming plays a big role in the creative process, but Grace also urges her team to take a proactive approach to exploring design elements in the wider world. “I encourage our people to look at the good, the bad, and the ugly,” she says. “I often tell my designers that the key to becoming a great designer is the ability to recognise a good design from a mediocre one. If you can envision the concept in your mind’s eye, then you can strive towards it. The perennial problem is if the designer cannot tell what good design looks like, then how can they work towards it? By constantly exposing the team to designs of all standards, they will develop the ability to discern good designs from the bad.

“We also focus on what’s happening in other parts of the world and look at how they are using technology in their designs.”



“Interior design has an edge over other related disciplines ... even when budgets for new builds are tightening, owners will seize the opportunity to upgrade in the low season.”


1. Cinnamon Grand, art sculpture. 2. Grace Soh and team. 3. Cinnamon Grand, function room.



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The worlds of design and technology are becoming more and more intertwined, both in terms of equipment and processes and in the way the increasing adoption of technology demands a comprehensive reshaping of layouts.

“I had the great opportunity of working on the Family Justice Courts in Singapore when they were computerising their manual systems,” Grace says, “We went on overseas study tours to Sydney and Melbourne to see what other, similar institutions had done and how it affected the fit-out. The interiors need to blend with the functionality requirements,” she notes, and recalls the fascination she felt at learning about this firsthand.

“Grace is an extremely creative, detail-oriented designer of supremely high standards who always puts the client first. She believes that nothing is impossible and together we were able to constantly push the boundaries of what glass could do.” – Florence Ng, Founder, Synergraphic Design

But the world of interior design isn’t all about an aesthetically pleasing kind of functionality. Grace and the DGDI team face their fair share of challenges arising in response to the cyclical nature of the business. “When the economy is good, there are plenty of new builds and renovations to work on, but at other times there may be a downturn for this sort of work.” There is, however, a silver lining. Grace notes, “Interior design has an edge over other related disciplines in that even when budgets for new builds are tightening, owners will seize the opportunity to upgrade in the low season.”

The firm faces further difficulties stemming from the industry’s cyclical nature, in terms of human capital. “Another big challenge is talent,” Grace adds, “and getting the right people to join our team.” This is an industry-wide problem that has become more pronounced over the past 10 years.

“During the low season, many specialists switch jobs or look for alternative work, which has unintended side effects. The requirement for these »



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“If we partner with people who have the same vision and the same goals, we can negotiate the best price without compromising on the value that the client pays for.”

specialists’ services are few and far between, but they still play an important role in realising the interior designer’s vision.”

Again, the problem is not insurmountable, and the solution to it arises naturally out of years of spade work. “This is where the network comes in,” Grace says. “Having been in the industry for so long, the resources we can tap into are wider and deeper. Networking is incredibly important in our profession, as is keeping your ear to the ground and looking out for the right people.”

Cultivating these networks requires commitment to certain values that ensure respect on all sides. “Trust is crucial, as is transparency and a shared worldview,” Grace explains, pointing to the fact that with years of experience in the design industry, and the networks built upon these three qualities, people know who to approach when they need specific things.

“Clients know they are getting value for their money when they come to us. The hallmark of a great designer is the ability to do much with little – maximum impact while incurring minimum expense. That’s our modus operandi. We pride ourselves on the fact that we can still do great work with reasonable budgets as well as big budgets,” she says. “It’s the creativity and the passion in what we do that drives us. As the old adage goes, ‘We cut the dress according to the cloth.’”

After being given a brief, design firms like DGDI consider the ways in which they can bring the price down by using new technologies available on the market. This enables them to come up with a range of options for clients, and Grace usually settles on two alternatives: one that is “the crème de la crème, and another that is just one grade down. We give the client the chance to see the difference for themselves” she says.

“At the end of the day, every client likes to have something neat and stunning, but the end product is mostly determined by the budget. Giving them



a couple of options, and educating them as you go along does good in the sense that they see what their money can buy. Sometimes they say, ‘Oh, it’s only another 20 per cent – why not go for the best?’”

The process of landing on a budget is the period in which trust and transparency are particularly critical. “Sometimes suppliers don’t know where they stand with you, and how much you want to spend. We are open with them, explaining the way the client sees things. We, being the professionals who are going to assist the client in realising their vision, need to take the lead.”

Grace articulates a model that eliminates uncertainty in the relationship between designer and supplier, one that will keep both parties happy while aiming for a goal that can best be achieved through honest and honourable collaboration. “If we partner with people who have the same vision and goals, we can negotiate the best price without compromising on the value the client pays for.”

Having worked in the interior design industry for so long, Grace knows all too well it comes with its own set of bumps and hurdles. However, she is up for the challenge.

“The design process is the most important part of it all,” she stresses. “Not everybody will see things the way you see them, so it’s about constantly inspiring people to innovate and push the boundaries of what is possible.” ■



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