

Iconic fashion designer Ralph Lauren once said “the key to longevity is to keep doing what you do better than anyone else.” While architecture and design (much like fashion) tend to be subjective in nature, there’s no arguing that longevity is a sure sign that you’ve succeeded in doing something—and probably a lot more than that—right.

Having not only survived but flourished despite the often turbulent economic times encountered over the past 40 years, it’s safe to assume that a firm like DiLeonardo International is not just here to stay, but charting a course for others to follow.

At the helm of this Rhode Island-based, family-owned firm is Robert DiLeonardo. The founder and chairman of this award-winning architectural and interior design practice, DiLeonardo is recognized worldwide as a leader in the field of hospitality design, not just for his firm’s results, but for his enthusiastic approach to the craft itself.

Indeed, his deep respect for history, combined with his excitement for the future is visibly manifested in the firm’s day-to-day operations. In a studio environment with no bureaucracy or departments, DiLeonardo allows teams to collaborate freely on innovative, relevant work. Its commitment to philanthropic, environmental and culturally-relevant design places a priority on intensive research, innate sensitivity and a boundless curiosity—all traits directly inherited from the founder.

With his firm celebrating its 40th year in the field, *I&S* thought it would be fitting to catch up with DiLeonardo and find out what inspires him, and what he considers to be the secrets of his firm’s success.

I&S: HOW AND WHEN DID YOU GET YOUR START IN THE FIELD OF INTERIOR DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE?

ROBERT DILEONARDO: In art school, I always wanted to be a sculptor and create art. Going through different publications, I always admired architecture. My mother was a fashion designer by education and became

FORTY YEARS Young

As the award-winning firm bearing his name celebrates its 40th anniversary, Robert DiLeonardo talks about family, values, and the art of being both timely and timeless.



Robert DiLeonardo



an interior decorator, which was a major influence for me. At a very young age, I started working on high-end residential work, and this led to bigger commissions with restaurateurs and developers.

WAS THERE SOMEONE WHO INFLUENCED YOU EARLY ON IN YOUR CAREER?

RD: My mother, as well as many of the architects and successful business people that I followed in various publications. I was also fortunate to have

ABOVE + LEFT Committed to creating work that is culturally relevant, the design team at DiLeonardo balanced the high fashion influence in Bangalore with a keen sense of place, implementing Indian-inflected patterns and materials throughout the Sheraton Bangalore Hotel in India.

great mentors that were a great source of encouragement and guidance.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR DESIGN PHILOSOPHY OR APPROACH TO THE CRAFT?

RD: I became a very good listener and early on took the approach that classic design has had a lasting appeal throughout the ages. I also looked at fashion designers like [Giorgio] Armani when he started his career a decade earlier. I began wearing his clothing and followed him throughout his meteoric rise, and all the way through it. He stayed with a classic look while always being timely, so I certainly felt that deep down inside that would be my aesthetic purity. Forty years later, I am still practicing being timely and timeless, and most of all, being a great listener to my clients and other professional consultants I work with, continuing to learn and grow.

DESCRIBE THE CULTURE OF YOUR FIRM. WHAT’S A TYPICAL DAY LIKE AT DILEONARDO?

RD: It is based on family values; a like mindset to produce excellence and expect excellence of yourself



● **ABOVE + TOP RIGHT** DiLeonardo's deep respect for history shows in his firm's work for the Kempinski Hotel Yinchuan in China; clean lines and luxurious materials are complemented by modern art reflecting the cultural achievements of the XiXia Dynasty, creating a heightened sense of drama and Chinese grandeur.

and colleagues, while smiling through the pressures, deadlines and successes, and enjoying the rewards of a successfully completed project.

WHAT SPECIFICALLY DREW YOU TO HOSPITALITY DESIGN, AND WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE MARKET THAT KEEPS YOU COMING BACK?

RD: The amount of people my designs could reach and stimulate, along with the ever-changing cultural nuances in the global world of hospitality.

WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE SOME OF YOUR GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS OR PROUDEST MOMENTS OVER THE PAST 40 YEARS?

RD: The many awards that have been won by the firm. Far exceeding our clients' expectations of financial return on their investments, based on the interior design environment put into place by my firm. And most of all, the transition of my three children, who are doing an amazing job of continuing on with the same ethos and taking the company to the next level.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES AND/OR OPPORTUNITIES FACING HOSPITALITY DESIGNERS AT THE MOMENT?

RD: The challenges have always been the same. We deal in an environment with visionary developers on which the financial market can play havoc, causing change upon change and delay upon delay.



Patience, perseverance and a commitment to work through these issues with the client are required.

HOW HAS THE PRACTICE OF INTERIOR DESIGN CHANGED OVER THE YEARS, AND WHERE DO YOU SEE IT HEADED IN THE NEXT 5 TO 10 YEARS?

RD: We strongly feel that sustainability is not a choice but a responsibility. We joined the sustainability


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movement very early on. We also have a completely integrated specification program, which allows us to work with clients and operators to best evaluate and implement green practices in our work.

Technology in our industry is constantly changing, whether it be Revit, CAD or other ways of making computer-generated presentations. What we do hasn't changed, but how we do it has. Technology has also enhanced our ability to work with talent from around the globe and make the most of their expertise.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A STUDENT JUST OUT OF DESIGN SCHOOL, OR A YOUNG PROFESSIONAL BEGINNING A CAREER IN DESIGN?

RD: Seek internships with design firms—be it architectural, landscaping or interior design—until you find what you are most suited in, then continue to pursue those interests. While in school, find other internships that may be available in the areas you choose and continue with perseverance. Once you graduate, practice on being a great listener to your older colleagues. Their experience is priceless—no matter how much quicker you might be on Revit or CAD or any new computer program. 



● **ABOVE + TOP RIGHT** To evoke the spirit of an elegant past, DiLeonardo designed in the language of a finely appointed trans-ocean liner for the St. Regis Resort Hotel on Yalong Bay, Sanya. Timeless color palettes, creamy neutral textures, and contrasting raw silks and tonal damasks set a tone of relaxed luxury.



contact

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FUN FACT

He is an avid outdoor sports enthusiast, and has recently gone back to sculpting.

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