

jennifer skaife

DiLeonardo

As the design director and senior associate at DiLeonardo, an architectural interior design firm with international reach from its headquarters in Rhode Island to Dubai, Hong Kong and Manila, Jennifer Skaife has been involved in every aspect of hospitality design planning. After all, the “DiLeonardo approach” is to research, design, present, develop and then finally implement a project. For a designer like Skaife, research and design go hand in hand, and regularly happen firsthand. “I was recently on site in Doha with a hard hat and safety boots reviewing a mock-up room and walking the slabs to see the structure of the ballroom and pre-function [space] as it stands,” she said.

DiLeonardo has been a player in the design scene for 40 years, under the direction of founder and chairman Robert DiLeonardo; Skaife has been in the mix for five years. “I’m sure becoming design director at DiLeonardo raised my profile,” she said. “I have been doing this for a long time.”

Skaife finds inspiration in working with the firm’s young staff members. It has an open-door policy that allows for anyone at any experience level to access senior staff to submit ideas and even the opportunity to design and travel internationally. She said, “I am surrounded by young, creative designers with fresh new ideas and skills that I am in awe of, and I work hard to stay current.”

In her early career, Skaife wanted to be a sculptor. She studied the art form as a college student, earning her bachelor of arts degree in three-dimensional design/interior design from the Birmingham Institute of Art & Design in England. She decided to pursue a career in design after she was “wisely guided to considering an applied art as a more realistic means of earning a living.”

During her college years, she reveled in her classes on art history, history of architecture, creative writing and life drawing. She also had fond memories of the projects she made in class, including creating models from balsa wood and glue. She

credits her teachers with helping her to understand the world of interior architecture, which still stirs her creativity. “I am still fascinated by designing interior space. I love to work with architects right up front. I get to draw nearly every day,” she said.

Drawing is still one of her passions and now one of her greatest assets; in fact, she considers her ability to sketch, coupled with her communication skills, to be her greatest professional strengths. Her design talent and people skills have scored her a plethora of clients over the years, including independent hotels as well as brands and companies like Hilton, Marriott, Millennium, Taj, Starwood and Ritz-Carlton.

Currently, she is working on two hotels in Dubai and one in Qatar. The Address is in downtown Dubai and slated to open later this year. She described the project as clean, simple, beautiful and responsive. Taj Hotel is a five-star property, also located in Dubai on Dubai Creek. The hotel is flanked on one side by a residential tower and the other side by a government building. The interior design concept is based on Indo-Islamic references.

The third project, Al Messila, is a large, low-rise development consisting of a hotel, villas and a standalone spa; the hotel will be operated by Langham Hotel Group. “It is unique in that it will be women only, including staff,” she said of the spa.

In designing these hotels and the others she has under her belt, Skaife’s method is to begin the design process with hard finishes including stone, wood, metals and glass. She moves forward with the design after those issues are first addressed. “I feel strongly that we begin here and not with a pile of fabrics,” she said. In existing buildings, there is always the challenge of elements that are already there. She said, “There is always a column right where you don’t want one.”

But, it is the challenge of working on hotels that she enjoys most. “They are so complex,” she said. As for possible future dream projects, she said, “I would love to have a high-end resort project somewhere in East Asia.”



Good design...

“...is creating an environment that evokes inquiry. It’s attention to detail macro and micro that creates order and beauty. It’s a great responsibility.”

—Katherine Klahn