

Callie Van der Merwe

Callie Van Der Merwe is without a doubt one of South Africa's design icons. With a superior knowledge of retail and retail design as well as "design thinking", he is now making his mark in Sydney with some really high profile projects. We interviewed him about his career and quite confident the best is still to come.

How did you get into interior design?

I studied Architecture at the University of Port Elizabeth, now the Nelson Mandela University. There were no Interior Design Schools at the time, and I never intended to make it my career. I fell into it by accident really. Straight out of University I started an Architectural practice in Port Elizabeth with a fellow graduate, Francois van der Merwe (no relation but still a great friend to this day). We hardly had any work, and I was kicking back at the office reading the paper one Monday morning when I stumbled upon a small add calling for entries for the PG Bison Interior Design competition. It was their very 1st one. Long story short, we ended up winning it, and that 1st design brought us up to Johannesburg with a client that wanted to build the actual design in Sandton City. Called Hydraulics it had a massive 4m high fibreglass man on the facade that caused quite a stir. What makes that story bizarre is that that very 1st client Chad Rahme who gave me my 1st project at age 25 in Sandton City introduced me to my 1st client Bradley Michael 25 years later here in Sydney.



What type of design do you specialise in?

Our practice grew through the years to specialise in Retail and Hospitality Design. Of late it included Workplace and Service Design, such as Banks. My favourite has always however been Hospitality, and it has been our jump start here in Sydney with a very iconic Meat & Wine in a very historic site in the Sydney Harbour

How would you describe your style?

I have always rejected style, but it's been said that I have failed in that quest and that my restaurants have a definite signature. All restaurants need a personality to be successful. They are highly social spaces, and thus I guess therefore that they will always be an extension of one's own personality

Where do you take your inspiration from?

The actual site that will host your creation for a while is probably the most important source of inspiration. To walk and feel it and understand what it potentially wants to be or could be is perhaps the most critical 1st step.

What are some of your significant achievements over the years?

We have been very fortunate to win many awards and get a lot of exposure. However, those are only ever achievable with great clients and a great team. It is always the sum of the parts that lead to success.

Where to next, what are your plans?

We are busy putting together a very exciting curated set of designer furniture

and utilitarian products that we will make available to both our clients and the public. There will be a lot more focus on product design and development

What would be your ultimate project?

When I came on holiday to Sydney 7 years ago, I dreamt of doing really premium restaurants in great locations here. We have been very fortunate to have had a terrific run here with Bradley Michael and have worked on incredible sites. Our latest project is in a 150-year-old warehouse (Campbells Stores, the 1st Bondhouse for imports) at The Rocks, in the old harbour. If however, I had to choose the ultimate dream project, I would want to do anything where design would serve a more significant humanitarian purpose. Not just in servitude of a commercial machine, but any project where what we do would in some way matter and contribute to making our world a better place for ordinary people. I am searching. Would also love to design and build a timber cruiser. We have to dream.

Which designers inspire you and why?

All designers who have managed to transform their design projects into those in which they have equity and real ownership. The problem with this industry today is that it has become very democratised. Everyone is a designer. It has discounted the profession to the extent that many successful designers are guns for hire and do not see the real financial rewards or returns due. I, therefore, admire designers like Brian Steinhoble, Yves Behar, Johny Ive, Nike CEO Mark Parker etc. All those that have managed to turn their passions into real reward.

Who would you most like to collaborate or work with on a project?

I would love to marry my love for the sea to my love of design. So if I had any remote chance now, I would love to work with someone like cabinet maker Remi Tessier turned superyacht designer. Frank Stephenson, the designer of the revived Mini Cooper, has also designed the most beautiful timber motorboat. Would love to take two years devoted to designing and building one of those. How that all lines up with giving back, I still need to figure out