

DARING TO DESIGN

Bangkok-based designer Bill Bensley tells AYESHA KHAN how a wrong number had first put him onto the design path, where taking chances, an eye for what works and his laid-back character have found him unusual success



THE LOBBY COURTYARD
AT THE SIAM, BANGKOK



BENSLEY'S WORK HAS EARNED HIM NUMEROUS TITLES SUCH AS "#1 SPA DESIGNER IN ASIA" AND "KING OF EXOTIC LUXURY RESORTS." HE IS RANKED ONE OF THE WORLD'S TOP 100 DESIGNERS BY BOTH TIME MAGAZINE AND ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST, BUT THE TITLE BENSLEY VALUES MOST IS PHILANTHROPIST

LEFT: BILL BENSLEY; RIGHT: STUDENTS PRACTISE WORKING BEHIND THE BAR OF SHINTA MANI, THE HOTEL SCHOOL IN SIEM REAP, CAMBODIA

BILL BENSLEY IS not your typical architect. Sure, he walks around his projects with a critical eye, measuring tape in hand, and you may even catch him nervously sketching on a napkin during his downtime, but there is something disarming about the Californian native. Perhaps it's just that, he's from California. Anaheim, more specifically, and that's where Disneyland is. Who could possibly be uptight if they grew up so close to the happiest place on earth?

Whatever the reason for his laid-back, endearing attitude, it is most definitely reflected in his designs. His interiors, just as his landscape and architecture projects do, all embody an air of light-hearted whimsy, with an inimitable sense of place. "Lebih gila, lebih baik," (Bahasa Indonesia for the crazier the better) he says, when asked to describe his design philosophy. Coincidentally, that seems to have also been Walt Disney's MO.

Bensley's interest in design began when he made a serendipitous "wrong number" phone call to what he thought was the Anaheim Fire Department for a high school career day project. "By mistake I called a landscape architect while attempting to call the Anaheim Fire Dept. Rocco, the landscape architect, gracefully came to my High School class and showed us his Knotts Berry Farm project and I was sold hook, line and sinker!" he recalls.



He was so sold that he landed himself a stint at Harvard's prestigious design school. His foray into Asia was equally serendipitous.

"On graduation day from Harvard I asked my classmate Lek Bunnag, a Thai, what he was going to do next. He said he was going to teach in Singapore and asked if I wanted to join him," Bensley recalls. "Not knowing where Singapore was, I quickly replied yes, found out where it was and joined him there four months later."

Once he had a taste of the East, Bensley was determined to explore Southeast Asia. He soon moved to Thailand to start his namesake design firm, and he now speaks fluent Thai, and shows no signs of ever leaving his adopted homeland.

Bensley's first lucky break came even before he had turned 30. "Dr Kajima (also a Harvard Grad) asked us to design the Four Seasons in Hawaii. I was 29 at the time, and this was a big deal. I thought it was going to be only us, but the local owners did not feel comfortable with a 29-year-old with a small office of Thai designers, so they set up a competition with the American landscape giant EDAW. We won, and the resort is still winning awards!" he fondly recalls.

He then decided to try his hand at interior design. "My first experience designing an interior was a bit of a laugh. In 1990

I attempted to redesign the lobby of the Anantara Hua Hin. Weeks before I had gathered many pieces of furniture from Chiang Mai and had asked that they be delivered at midnight, after all the guests went to sleep. We began setting up the furniture, but it didn't look right. At 3am I went for a walk in the parking lot and saw, on the back of the truck, our new antique wooden king-size platform bed that was to be delivered to my Bangkok home the next day. I got a few guys together and we lifted it off the truck, and set it up right in the middle of the lobby and worked the rest of the furniture around it. This worked out splendidly and by 6am it was all done. Until this day, happily the lobby remains like that!" Also to this day, beds in lobbies and bars remain a signature Bensley design element.

Slowly the word spread and Bensley's firm was awarded coveted projects such as the St Regis Bali, Indonesia, The Mandarin Oriental Sanya, China and Four Seasons resorts in Chiang Rai, Chaing Mai and Samui. His design prowess can be seen on Bangkok's own Chao Phraya banks in the new Siam hotel, where he created a colourful story told through Krissada Sukosol Clapp's vast collection of antiques. The lavish rooms at the Siam follow varied themes such as military (complete with antique swords and medals) and beauty queen (with antique sashes from pageants past).



A ROOM AT THE
INTERCONTINENTAL
DANANG, VIETNAM



A SEATING ALCOVE IS SUSPENDED 100
METRES ABOVE THE SEA AT THE
INTERCONTINENTAL DANANG, VIETNAM



For his latest project in Danang, Vietnam, Bensley transformed the side of a sea-facing hill into a magical Vietnamese village during French colonial rule. “We wanted to create a seaside village that was perhaps built at the height of the French occupation. You will see that the guest rooms are clearly Vietnamese, while the specialty restaurant, La Maison 1888, is clearly French, and is meant to have been built in the year 1888. The grass roofs of the beach restaurants are meant to be of a “poorer” local vernacular architecture,” he explains.

Bensley’s work has earned him numerous titles such as “#1 Spa Designer in Asia” and “King of Exotic Luxury Resorts”. He has been mentioned as one of the world’s top 100 designers by both *Time Magazine* and *Architectural Digest*, but the title Bensley values most is philanthropist. Six years ago, he developed Shinta Mani, a hotel school in Siem Reap, Cambodia, where underprivileged students from surrounding villages are offered a one-year education in hospitality completely free of charge.

The hotel school has now grown to encompass classrooms that hold up to 50 students, and its own chic 38-room boutique hotel where students gain the ultimate practical experience. Since its inception, Shinta Mani has graduated around 120 students who now all happily have jobs in the hospitality industry. When he is not busy shuttling around the region on his various projects, Bensley can be found dedicating his time to Shinta Mani. He has even taken pieces from his own home to decorate his beloved school.

“The best advice I ever received was from my mum, who said, ‘when in doubt do the kind thing,’ he says when complimented about his giving spirit. Clearly doing the kind thing is very much a part of this mild-mannered Californian design virtuoso’s life. ■

THE MAENAM
SUITE AT THE
SIAM, BANGKOK

