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# SPACE ACE

Leading interior designer Alexandra Champalimaud believes it takes a deep knowledge of a space, a place and its people to create her particular brand of magic.

STORY **APPLE MANDY**

The world of interior design is blessed with plenty of female marquee names and Lisbon-born Alexandra Champalimaud – who has created bespoke designs for some of the world’s most glamorous hotels and premium residences – is one of them.

In her recent visit to Hong Kong, Champalimaud spoke about her involvement in the new Mount Nicholson project on The Peak. This super-luxury development, a joint venture by Wharf (Holdings) Limited, Nan Fung Group and Wheelock Properties, is due to be completed next year and will feature 19 detached houses and 48 apartments.

Champalimaud, one of the 10 world-class interior designers, will put her touch on some of the four-storey detached houses that will go on sale.

“When you approach a job like this, you have to think about the DNA of the place and then quietly create the magic,” says Champalimaud. “And that magic is the philosophy to my design; that is, it will get better and better with time. It’s also about how well you make people feel in that space and how they can feel emotionally transformed in a positive way.”

## A MATTER OF BALANCE

“DNA” features a good deal in Champalimaud’s discussion of the Mount Nicholson project. Her design is determined by a sense of the space plus the development’s history, setting, purpose and the people who will live there.

Champalimaud describes Mount Nicholson as the “epitome of luxury” and when it comes to furnishing such living spaces, Champalimaud sources original and tailor-made pieces from around the world. While at the Venice Biennale, she visited a small atelier and met a weaver whom she is now working with to produce panels and fabrics for one of the Mount Nicholson detached houses.

“This is the sort of thing that will make it rare and special. It’s the craftsmanship that’s going to differentiate one space from another,” she says. “Nothing makes me sadder than when I see a piece and tell myself ‘Oh I know that chandelier. [The design] has been used here, here and here’. It makes things ordinary.”

Champalimaud’s residential projects are regarded for their subtle but rather different designs. She has worked on projects that require a high level of knowledge and the capacity include historic references

01 A conceptual sketch of one of the detached houses’ living rooms at Mount Nicholson

02 Alexandra Champalimaud



“IN THE DESIGN WORLD, TALENT IS NOT ONLY MAKING A PRETTY DRAWING. IT’S ABOUT MAKING THAT DRAWING COME TO A REALITY AND MAKING IT HAPPEN SUCCESSFULLY.”

PHOTOGRAPHY/VINCENT MA

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**03-04** Champalimaud completely renovated The Hotel Bel-Air's lobby lounge and living rooms

**05** The Harlequin Suite's living room in The Dorchester Hotel, London

**06** The lobby lounge at The Waldorf Astoria in New York

such as the condominium development at East 74th Street on New York's Upper East Side.

"I don't have a formula that takes a bit of this classicism with that and equals that; my work is not a formula," she says. "Designing is purely a creative process and everything has to be original. It has to work and feel right."

#### REACHING FOR SUCCESS

Born to an English father and a Portuguese mother, Champalimaud moved to Switzerland when she was seven and went to boarding school in England at 11. She stayed there until she was 16 but she longed to return to Lisbon where, eventually, she pursued her university education, taking courses in architecture, interior design, furniture, silverware, casting and lacquer.

Champalimaud later found herself in Montreal and started working there in her early 20s. Confident and determined, she built her own firm catering to

different clients. She designed the office of Pierre Trudeau, the former prime minister of Canada, and rooms in hotels owned by Canadian Pacific Railways, now operated under the Fairmont name.

When Montreal was going through a less-than-prosperous period, Champalimaud, who was already winning international awards, decided to leave and try her luck in New York. The real estate firm, Blackstone, noticed her work at the Drake and Algonquin hotels and began to give her commissions.

"Education is extremely important but what's really important in life is your experiences and abilities," says Champalimaud, who's been running her namesake company in New York for about 20 years now. "In the design world, talent is not only making a pretty drawing. It's about making that drawing come to a reality and making it happen successfully."

As Champalimaud became a familiar face in the industry, hospitality giants like The Waldorf Astoria



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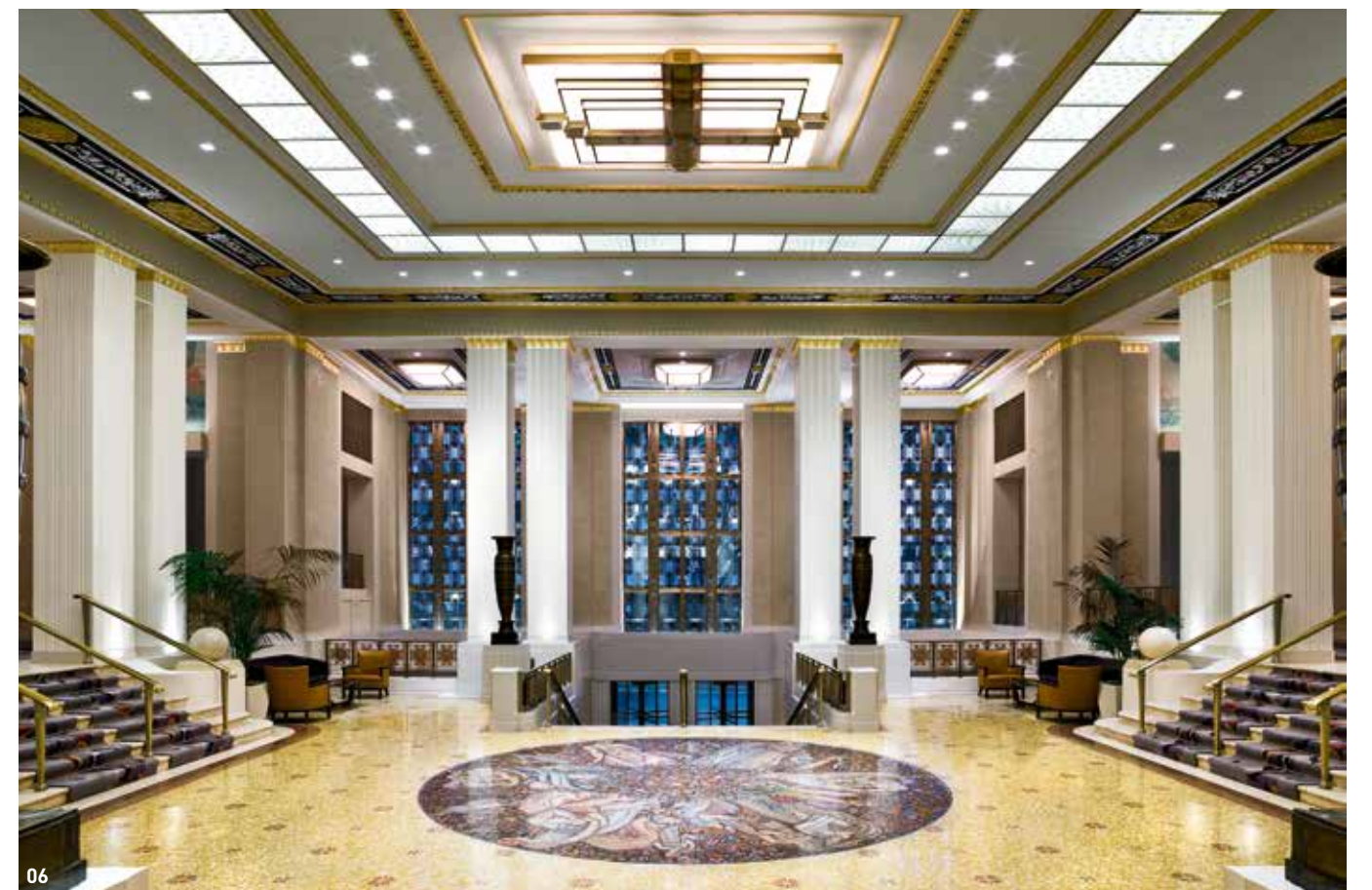
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in New York, Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles, and The Dorchester Hotel in London, have commissioned her to do master planning, interior architecture, and interior design for their hotels. And proving they are well received, the Hotel Bel-Air won six titles from International Hotel Awards, including the Best Overall Hotel Interior and Best Overall Hotel Renovation.

But designing interiors for five-star hotels is not all roses. Champalimaud admitted she had previously encountered difficult hotel clients. "My biggest nightmare is when I go back to a project knowing we have designed it beautifully [but] there have been a million decisions made along the way and those decisions have changed and showed up with your name on it; you could have a cardiac arrest," she says.

Apart from the countless awards and accolades, Champalimaud was also awarded the Platinum Circle for Lifetime Achievement by *Hospitality Design* magazine in 2000. She was also inducted into the *Interior Design's* Hall of Fame in 2012, for making a significant contribution to the growth of the design industry.

Today, Champalimaud employs a diverse team of 30 associates and she continues to mentor and help develop their career. "Tenacity is essential, as well as talent and curiosity," she says matter-of-factly. "Travel to discover cultures and seek out the original. Learn to accept change and not be fearful of it." ☺



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