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Interview – The Designer, Yasmine Mahmoudieh

From *identity* magazine (Motivate Publishing, Dubai), March 2005.

Plane talking

*Yasmine Mahmoudieh is best known for her hotel interiors, but the Berlin-based designer has been busy devising cabins for the new Airbus A380. Now, she's keen to see a flying-themed hotel in Dubai. Text: **Matt Jones**.*

Whatever the client, from a leading international hotel chain to the manufacturer of the world's most talked about passenger aircraft, architect and interior designer Yasmine Mahmoudieh says she's faced with the same two options at the start of every project.

"There are only two alternatives for me," she says. "Either to design something that's better than what has been done, or to design something that has not been done before, where there's a demand or a need."

Born in Germany to an Iranian father and a German mother, Mahmoudieh studied art history in Florence, architecture at the École d'Interieur in Geneva, interior design at the College of Nôtre Dame, in Belmont, and architecture and interior design at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she earned her diploma.

"I try with my design work to expand the horizon of possibilities," she says. "I believe that my American education has given me this sense of trying out something new and developing new directions, instead of following the known. In that sense, I think very much like an entrepreneur."

Mahmoudieh founded her first studio in Los Angeles in 1986 and six years later opened studios in Hamburg and Berlin. Offices in Barcelona and London followed and a Dubai office is being established as *identity* goes to press.

Her company, Mahmoudieh Design, undertakes complete interior design concepts for hotels, restaurants, shopping centres, office complexes and multi-use projects. In 2003, she began work with Airbus on the interior features of the much anticipated Airbus A380, which was revealed in Toulouse this January. It's a project she'd talk about at length, but for a 20-page confidentiality agreement with the aircraft manufacturer.

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Mahmoudieh's award-winning interior design projects include the Coconut Grove Plaza, in Miami, offices for Tishman Speyer, hotels for the Wyndham chain and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Her resume also includes such diverse projects as the Regent Beverly Wilshire Hotel, in Beverly Hills – the *Pretty Woman* hotel – and the Fishergate Shopping Centre in the much less glamorous setting of Preston, northern England.

Mahmoudieh also designs furniture and exhibitions, and a second company, Mahmoudieh Concepts, focuses on the complete conceptualisation of more functionally oriented designs in the commercial real estate sector.

With her sights fixed firmly on Dubai, the designer hopes her Airbus experience will open doors with Emirates, one of the first customers for the A380. Meanwhile, she plans to bring a hotel exhibit based on the five senses to the city, and has been marketing her concept of a 'flyotel', based on an aviation theme, to investors here.

identity caught up with Mahmoudieh in Berlin to find out more. Excerpts from the interview:

The A380 reveal grabbed the headlines in January. What's your involvement in the project?

I worked directly with Airbus in Finkenwerder, Germany, but I'm very interested to work now with airlines who are ordering A380s, since, of course, I have a lot of knowledge about the possibilities and best use. Most airlines have a clash between a plane that looks like a 21st century product and interiors that look like an old fashioned house, especially in the first class section.

When Richard Branson and other airline owners talk about double beds, gyms and bars on the A380, it seems as if the ideas are theirs. Are you the one who should perhaps be receiving the credit?

I can't say anything of my commission since it's very confidential. But I'm working not only on nice design features, but primarily, as in the beginning of all my projects, on how the needs of customers can be understood and what new service or marketing ideas can be offered to customers, be it in a hotel, an airplane or an office building.

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What are the similarities to your hotel work, and the differences?

The hotel work is very similar to airplane design. The trend of a more contemporary aesthetic for hotels will, I believe, also catch up on airplane interiors, which look mostly very antiquated in comparison, and not up to today's standard. One shouldn't forget also that the traveller of today is much younger than 20 years ago and, therefore, demands have changed. I always look at demographics and progress, which have a great impact on how we design for the future. Unfortunately, many airlines believe that things that are done for a long time in a certain way have to stay this way. Virgin is a good example of new design, which obviously works very well combined with innovative service concepts. That's why I believe many other airlines could profit from an unconventional approach.

Has the A380 project opened doors for you with government and public sector clients?

Since this commission was so confidential, it doesn't really affect me too much. My work is never limited to one area. I believe that if you're a good architect and designer you can work in any related field, no matter if you've worked in it before or not. It's the fresh approach that counts, and asking yourself and the clients many questions that lead you to a successful project.

The A380 is a very European project, has it reinforced your identity as a 'European' designer?

I feel I'm a global designer, since I've worked and lived in many countries. I'm very glad that my formation as an architect was a mixture of European and American education. In the States, I learnt to think big and to think in concepts and master plans before getting into details. Especially in California, the incredible freedom and creativity of thought has very much shaped my philosophy and approach. In Europe, I learnt to adjust everything very carefully to the different cultures there.

What's the key to successful hotel design?

To understand the needs of people and to ask why things are the way they are. Why not challenge that? What is unique about the project? What will a customer remember besides good service? How can I distinguish my hotel property from anybody else's? Design has to give an answer to those questions.

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With more people travelling for business or pleasure, to what extent is hotel design influencing the interior design of private homes?

Hotel design definitely leads what follows in homes. People get inspired by good hotel design.

Which of your hotel projects is a personal favourite and why?

That's difficult to say. All projects have a different story. The Arne Jacobsen hotel in Copenhagen for Radisson SAS was a big challenge to renovate due to its incredible fame. Everyone was watching what I was doing and very suspicious about any renovation. The incredible acceptance once it was finished was overwhelming.

The most moving project, definitely, was the first design hotel for the handicapped outside Berlin. I got two international interior design awards for it – The International Core Design 2002, first prize, and the Europa Hotel Design Award 2004. It's a very profitable operation with 90 per cent of customers returning.

Another project is an exhibition I conceived, which opens on February 24 outside Zurich, in Switzerland. I had the idea almost a year ago to show the future of hotel suites and guest rooms for five-star hotels via a journey through our five senses. I called the exhibition 'five+sensotel'. You go through five rooms, each of which is dedicated to one of our senses: smell, taste, touch, vision and sound. I asked a well known international smell artist, Sissel Tolaas, to get involved with smells and taste, together with IFF New York, the world's biggest fragrance factory. The exhibition is supposed to travel to Dubai and London. I'm actually starting to look for sponsors in Dubai.

Where does your inspiration come from?

From everywhere – you just need to keep your eyes open. My best ideas evolve through my extensive travelling. But also watching a movie, such as a Fellini movie or a James Bond movie, can be very inspiring.

What are your projects in the UAE to date? What's on the horizon?

I like Dubai and the Emirates a lot. I'm currently talking to several investors who showed a big interest in my work and I've submitted offers on some concrete projects.

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I've developed an idea about a special hotel and see it as a challenge. Many hotels have been built in Dubai over the years with much more to come. But if you think about really unique ones, you can name them on the fingers of one hand. I believe Dubai now needs not only an increase of quantity, but an increase of quality. Many hotels in Dubai, as in many places of the world, are very 'exchangeable'.

I came up with the concept of the 'flyotel', about the passion of flying, and have presented it in Dubai. I can't tell you more at this stage, but it looks very positive. It will have a hangar for seaplanes that will enable you to see The Palm and The World from the same bird's eye perspective that you see in the marketing brochures.

I'm not interested in adding another hotel to the skyline in Dubai unless it's very special. I believe my concept is very special and I've asked Kas Oosterhuis, of ONL architects, in Holland, to team up with me. The result is a unique building with a very new technology behind it that enables an unusual, organic shape at a cost that's not much higher than a standard building. If we can pull off this project in Dubai, I believe it will set new standards in construction and hotel design worldwide.

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