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THE HEDONIST / THE INTERVIEW

THE INTERVIEW | DIEGO GRONDA "Searching For Excellence In Design"

"I am continuously searching for new design solutions to address the never ending changes and behavior of a global community, which is my passion"

Diego Gronda is an international designer with more than 22 years of leadership in architecture and interior design developed in all the five continents. Throughout his career, he has collaborated with some of the most influential and bespoke forces in hospitality such as **Virgin Hotels**, **Nobu Hospitality**, **Mandarin Oriental**, all **Starwood Hotels** brands, highlighting the creation of many W hotels in China, in France and in The Caribbean. He has created great environments for hotels, resorts, spas, clubs and restaurants, having all their own identity for new brand hotels around the world. This is one of the many things that fascinates Diego the most – the creation of brands, which is in his words "the ultimate design experience". Diego Gronda, who defines himself as a professional with a renaissance point of view, overlooking every single aspect of the design, is continuously searching for new design solutions to address the never ending changes and behavior of a global community, which is his passion.



Diego Gronda At His Design Studio in Madrid, Spain

- **Your career as an architectural designer started at a very young age, being a succession of successful projects and collaborations. How did this passion arise in you?**

Design has been incorporated within me since young. My father was a civil engineer, so not only he designed the residential towers he developed, but he was involved in the end-to-end process, from purchasing the land to selling the land. He was a renaissance man from the development point of view. I've seen him designing my whole life throughout the weekends, and I quickly took the same hobby. When I was 20 years old and in Architectural school, I was lucky enough to be part of a competition to design the private brands of the World Bank in Washington DC. The IFC headquarters selected me to design the first office in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the country where I was born. That was my first commission and it was about interior design, which I knew nothing about. I think these are the challenges that mark your career. My thought was: "This is, at the end of the day, design. There is no distinction between architecture and interior design or industrial design. It is the creative mind searching for an answer to a specific social need". It ended up being very successful and was selected as one of the best offices in the world of the IFC and that's how pretty much my career started, just by coincidence and a minor stroke of luck. That opened to me many doors into many other companies. Now, my passion for design I believe is difficult to pinpoint when that happened, it was just a series of small acts that collected throughout time and create the person that I am now.

- **Have you always envisioned a bright future?**

I never envision a bright future – a bright future comes and goes. It is something that you don't search for. My search has always been to look for the best and most creative solution to a specific problem. The brightness of success comes out of that, not of a specific search of success itself. I think those who look for that tend to deviate their careers into something else, and my energy, my inspiration, my search has never changed, has always been the search of excellence in design. Provided that this doesn't change, I will keep on evolving and hopefully continue moving on a successful path, but that is a very delicate thing. You never know what the future can bring to you. So I am optimistic and happy by simply doing what I like to do.

- **You have a very international background -Argentina, US, Spain and projects all over the world. How do you think this fact has nourished you professionally and personally?**

When you submerge into a variety of cultures, having grown up in Argentina with parents that would make me travel a lot already since being a kid, you start collecting experiences from other cultures and religions...I did live twenty years in Argentina, more than ten years in New York City, and more than ten years in Spain – they have a lot of similarities but at the same time they are every different. I need to add that most of my work has been primarily naturalized in Asia, Middle East and Europe. That has allowed me to travel throughout a huge variety of cultures and religions, ways of doing things, beliefs, rituals, politics. The more you travel the more you get immersed into different cultures. You become a curator to religious, cultural and political points of view. I always like the ambiguity of not being a hundred per cent Argentinean or new Yorker or Spanish, or Asian. It is a combination of all of those that define the person who I am. When you are able to see that there are great lessons that can be learned in countries that are radically different to yours, is when you start to be a global citizen. It is not about going to a new country and forcing your own ideas but to really listen and to celebrate the local view. The idea of looking at a culture from the outside, without any prejudice or constraints, to have that freedom is one of that things that I treasure the most.

“When you are able to see that there are great lessons that can be learned in countries that are radically different to yours, is when you start to be a global citizen.”

Yes, it is difficult sometimes to define myself, but I do enjoy that, I do believe it helps my job considerably. Because you arrive with a white canvas and a clear mind. You are not trying to interject foreign ideas. I do believe this is crucial in the world we are living, where we have this tendency of doing international design. Sometimes you land in an airport or hotel, but you basically can't tell where you are in the world. This is happen to me many times and is disconcerting, I am not in favor of nationalisms that tend to enclose a specific culture.

- **What brought you to set up your own studio, Studio Gronda?**

I believe this was in my blood from day 1, in fact my first project in Argentina when I was 21. I was working in a similarly named company – so In a way I started at Studio Gronda and I would like to leave this world working at Studio Gronda. However, when I moved to New York to work and study for my Masters in Architecture after finishing architecture school in Argentina, despite having already a strong set of projects, I realized that what I was designing was of a flat and primitive design as it did not have an international exposure. It's funny how you can be a successful person in one country and when you move to somewhere else you realize you haven't been part of a bigger competition.



Diego Gronda

I was very fortunate to be named Design Director both to Tony Chi & Associates (who was a great mentor during allowed me to direct creatively one of his studios in New York, and create the studio abroad in Spain and later on in Shanghai. My conversation when deciding to David Rockwell was very amicable – there was a sense that it was the right path for me, that I had been able to develop my ideas in huge design powerhouses and tl

was time for me to spread my wings and start creating my own brand. This was already starting to happen but I obviously needed to make the big jump. Studio Gronda brings me back to 30 years ago when I was running the studio in Argentina. It's almost like a natural evolution, and one that I am very proud of is right now competing face to face with other global international designers and starting to develop our own voice and way of seeing things.

- **In your opinion, what role does design play in people's lives?**

The role is huge. The first residential environment is the very first physical parameter created around a newborn. Its colors, aesthetics, aromas, creates deep imprints in a child's psyche. It's like food – there is a comfort food that links to great moments of our past; food that maybe as adults we would reject. I truly believe the same thing happens for physical environments – the environments that we grow up in will define us on what it is we like as adults – which colors would make us feel comfortable or at home, and which colors would be hostile to us.

“The environments that we grow up in will define us on what it is we like as adults.”

Part of our role is not only to define environments, but more importantly how have those environments influenced our target demographic. One of the key elements of our designing from a holistic point of view, is not from a specific point of view of the architect, but from the point of view of the target demographic. That is the challenge, and that is the fascinating part of this social cultural equation that we bring into design.

- **It is said your focus is on creating “a holistic user experience”. How does this reflect on your design projects?**

One of the most challenging things of creating a holistic user experience is to be able to detach from your own belief and style. There are many architects who impose their specific style – such as a branded suit with a specific brand and a specific cut and you have to buy into that cut. We like to believe ourselves to be tailor-designers that create very bespoke experiences for a particular target demographic and creating a holistic user experience around a particular user. We cherish and enjoy creating environments with an original design – we never repeat designs, even with the same client and the same concept in a different city. We never duplicate or clone our own designs because the reality is they will never have the same environment or culture or target demographic. We treat the design, leaving the most important elements in the case of the brand, to be able to identify those common elements and find the composition and variety of the projects into one brand.

- **How would you describe your design language and what do you want it to convey?**

Projects are very much like books, each one tells a different story. Storytelling is extremely important in the way we design, it creates a narrative and that is what will define each one of our designs. When you cherish not having a specific design language or style, what you convey is a point of view, how you tackle a problem or what strategies you employ. In our case, location, culture and demographic are very important, they bring a series of elements that will define design accordingly. It's always an exercise of detaching yourself from beliefs and the way you like to experience a specific space. It's always about understanding what helps the specific demographic click, and the design is built around that. The design always has to be fresh, it's not about capturing a specific element and recreating it in our projects – it's always an interpretation. I think the way we convey our interpretation about local culture is our own style, but it's not something you see aesthetically. It's how you think about them and reinterpret and materialize them in a specific project. I think that is what makes us unique and that is not a collection of what I was taught in school – it is really a collection of experiences for the past 25 years travelling around the world and pretty much absorbing all the different designs and points of view to finally creating one of my own – one point of view that will define my narrative to make a unique, magical but very target-oriented.

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This is also relevant when it comes to commercial projects because it is directly related to commercial profitability. It is also an important part of the culture here in Studio Gronda – a project has to be beautiful, has to create emotion, has to create a strong engagement with the guests. When the people spend more time in the hotels or restaurants or spas or offices, they also spend more money, because they found their comfort in the environment we have created. That is when we define our project as successful – one whereby the guest might not be an expert in design, but for some reason, they want to come back to spend time in the particular project. That is what we aim to create – a social connection at an emotional level.

- **Where does the inspiration come from throughout the design process?**

The Greeks had a belief that you had to receive inspiration by physically opening windows. That kind of colorful, almost childish metaphor is interesting because I think there is some truth in it. I wish I could be inspired at the beginning of each project – but the truth is that projects start with a lot of work, drafting, understanding of the spaces – let's not forget that architecture is the one discipline that combines scientific point of view of defining spaces with an artistic realm. You are pretty much working with both sides of your brain. So the inspiration does not necessarily come in the beginning, but there is obviously a part of the design that is more pragmatic – by exercising that part of the brain, sooner or later inspiration comes in.



Diego's Wall Of Inspiration

I have an enormous wall in my studio with pictures that inspire me. My golden rule is never to have spaces or buildings define that wall of inspiration. My pictures include art, sculptures, cars, vases and so on – things that create an emotional reaction for my creative juices to come to life. One of the important parts of getting inspiration is getting inspired. I like walking around in cities that I don't know, getting lost helps me see the city in a different point of view. When you have the luxury of time, the inspiration comes from the most simple things, it can even come out of ugliness. Overall, inspiration comes from everything that surrounds me. How do you bring that to life in a project? I am an experienced collector of experiences – I used to photograph as a teenager and that is something I enjoy very much. Travelling, not the typical clichés, but the things that make a city special.

- **One of your latest projects is *Tatel Miami*, a luxury restaurant behind whose creation we find a partnership between recognized personalities such as *Rafa Nadal*, *Pau Gasol* or *Enrique Iglesias*. How does Spanish culture materialize within the space? How does this blend with the local culture and lifestyle?**

One of the most difficult things about Spanish cuisine that I have experienced while designing another restaurant in Las Vegas, is that you can bring the aesthetic, but it is difficult to create the atmosphere of a Spanish restaurant. That is what makes Spain so distinctive beyond its cultural uniqueness. One of the biggest successes of *Tatel Miami* is a well-balanced combination of great food, great service, great entertainment in an environment that is not intimidating to guests. The Spanish atmosphere is loud and energetic – something that is not uncommon in Miami. This is where we have an advantage. But the way the Spanish party and the way people in Miami party is fundamentally different – and we needed to establish that difference. What the people in Miami appreciate about *Tatel Miami* is the way parties are approached.



TATEL Miami Brings Traditional Spanish Cuisine And Culture To The Heart Of Miami Beach's Art Deco District.

To materialize the space with Spanish culture we worked with reproductions of art pieces from Spanish artists who painted for many years in New York and Spain. It's about two ladies next to the beach in the turn of the century. Those paintings are favourites of mine, the way they were defining female sensuality of the era. We basically pair that old-fashioned drawing with giant LED screens on the ceiling, that shows a couple swimming in the moonlight, which represents modern Spanish sensuality. That play between dynamic images and the old painting makes it very exciting. We also commission a movie director to create a clip for us of a flamenco dancer stretching in a studio for a performance. The videoclip was done in a way that did not reflect the perfect flamenco session. Capturing such moments that are not fantastic, shows an integral part of the Mediterranean lifestyle, both in the past and the future. That is, for me, the successful aspects that we brought out.



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The music is also very important, it helps us connect to the energy of Spain. When it comes to personality, it is also very interesting – the Spanish of the future are global Spaniards, having lived and succeeding abroad, while keeping their own roots. I think TATEL Miami similarly has an international personality, very much rooted to the Spanish culture but with an international way of partying and seducing the world with Spanish roots.

- **What is luxury for you?**

Luxury for me is time, life, our lives. 24 hours give us a limited amount of time and when we have that time to enjoy the things we like, that is true luxury. I was once having a discussion with a billionaire about life, and at one point he said 'I will give you my fortune to have your age'. That is when you realize you can't basically compare life, luxury and money. The fact that time is limited – some people are even willing to pay millions of dollars to have more time.

“When we have time to enjoy the things we like, that is true luxury.”

So when I design a hotel or resort and people ask what is so luxurious about it, our design approach is that time will stop – you might only be visiting for three days but you will feel like you spent a full week. Time is luxury. This is what we are focused on from a design point of view, to create an opportunity to reflect on how life actually represents.

- **Do you consider yourself a successful individual?**

I have a practice whereby we work on projects that we want, hence we are not forced to perform projects we are not interested in. So from a professional point of view, I am in a very comfortable position in my life. But more importantly, I have my health, I have my beautiful wife and family, and that is what makes me successful from a personal point of view.

“My professional success is directly related to my personal success.”

I think even though I always make it a point to split my personal and professional life, my professional success is directly related to my personal success of being surrounded by people who I respect and love dearly, a family that supports me, and that is what makes me a successful individual. Whether I am a successful designer, that is up to my clients and guests to decide.

- **What do you think of the following? “You can be, do and have anything you want”**

Let me be blunt and extremely accurate when I answer this question. I am, do and have everything that I want at this point. I think we have to learn that in the world that we live in, we need to cherish and appreciate what we have and live in the present, not live in anxiety about what might potentially happen in the future. We need to appreciate the fact that we are alive, and that we can help, along with others, the world become a better place.

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