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From Hotels to Jewelry, Gulla Jónsdóttir Crosses All Boundaries

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By Edie Cohen





Mathematics and biology were what Gulla Jónsdóttir studied before leaving her native Reykjavik, Iceland, to enroll in the undergraduate architecture program at SCI-Arc in Los Angeles. She knew not a soul. After graduation, she joined Richard Meier & Partners Architects, where she worked on the Getty Center. Next, a four-year stint at Walt Disney Imagineering entailed a constant

back-and-forth to Tokyo, designing retail and even amusement-park ride for Tokyo DisneySea. She was introduced to hotel work as a principal at Dodd Mitchell Design, contributing to such projects as the Hollywood Roosevelt.

Years later, the Macau Roosevelt is the first ground-up hotel from Gulla Jónsdóttir Architecture + Design. The 10-person firm's portfolio is bulging with high-profile hospitality projects, worldwide. Restaurants include the Michelin-starred Grand Restaurant/Jean-François Piège in Paris and Comal at Chileno Bay Resort & Residences in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. Back home in L.A., Kimpton La Peer Hotel opens in the fall. Jónsdóttir and her staff have delved into residential and product design, too.

Interior Design: Why the switch from hard science?

Gulla Jónsdóttir: It was in my DNA. My father was an engineer. My grandfather was an artist, and I started drawing with him when I was 3. I fell in love with architecture at age 12 while I was in Florence—I'd been going to Italy for the summer since I was 6.

ID: To what do you attribute your success?

GJ: I make my hotels feel good, not just look good. I've lived in hotels, so I know them.

ID: What are your cardinal rules for hospitality spaces?

GJ: I design for all five senses. I'm particular about flow and space-planning. I incorporate curves to give you the sensation of being embraced. I include natural materials, metals, and sensuous forms, grown-up glamour. I like everything to have a story and be site-specific or contextual.



In Paris, Le Grand Restaurant/Jean-François Piège. Photography by Khanh Renaud.

ID: How does that apply to, say, your Paris restaurant?

GJ: It starts at the door, which is bronze perforated with a map of the city, and the handle represents the Seine. Then guests see and smell the food in the open kitchen. The faceted skylight over the dining room represents the jewels that a chic Parisian might wear.

ID: Tell us about your affinity for Mexico.

GJ: Right when I started my firm, and we were about to begin designing the Mexican restaurant Red O for Rick Bayless, I lived for a year and a half in San José del Cabo. I learned Spanish and fire dancing. At Comal, my love of Mexico comes through in the locally sourced materials, for instance the three kinds of white stone. In the lounge, a huge brass wall sculpture was inspired by footprints in the sand. And, of course, there's tequila! Bottles are suspended from brass rods in the bar.

ID: What are some of the contextual details at your Macau hotel?

GJ: The restaurant's ceiling is concrete formed to recall waves in the South China Sea, and the guest rooms have polished chrome door handles, again like jewelry.



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Plated in rose gold, a 3-D printed ring. Photography by Jesús Bañuelos.

ID: Speaking of jewelry, that's some ring you're wearing.

GJ: It's my own design, 3-D printed and gold-plated. I'm working on a collection of jewelry plated in rose or yellow gold.

ID: We've excited about your Kimpton hotel in L.A.

GJ: While designing it, I was thinking about a symphony of the arts, relating to the West Hollywood neighborhood. There will be a unique piece of string art in each guest room and large photographs and paintings in the suites. The penthouse suite, called the House, will have my whole furniture collection.



Petal, a chair in stained ash bentwood. Photography by Jesús Bañuelos.

ID: What's the collection like?

GJ: It's called Heimaland, Icelandic for homeland. All 13 pieces are made in L.A. They're limited-edition, sold through Philadelphia's Wexler Gallery.

ID: Could you mention some current projects?

GJ: We're finishing up the Mayfair Hotel in downtown L.A., Yamashiro restaurant inside a 100-year-old building in the Hollywood Hills, and a restaurant in the Bahamas. I'm also doing scarves and caftans, made of Italian silk and cashmere, for the Icelandic fashion label Saga Kakala.

ID: What do you dream of designing?

GJ: The stadium for the Los Angeles Olympics, 2028.