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'I, We, Hospitality'



The Entrepreneur

Text *Narelle Yabuka* Portrait Photography *Justin Loh*
Project Photography *Owen Raggett (courtesy of greymatters)*

Alan Barr, founder of Singapore-headquartered design studio greymatters, takes a diversified approach to the hospitality design business and his own restaurant ventures.

“I didn’t set out to become a restaurateur,” says Singapore-based interior designer Alan Barr. “It just happened. I guess I got tired of consulting,” he says, with an energy that fails to dip during a 70-hour discussion in his design studio near Mohamed Sultan Road.

In April he is set to open the seventh restaurant in which he has a personal stake. All of them are in the Asia Pacific region, with his latest one – a Manhattan-style brasserie in Beijing called Skin+bones – represents his first foray into China.

His design studio greymatters (which has offices in Singapore, Bangkok and San Francisco) is known for some well known F&B projects in Singapore – Tippling Club, Bin 38, Open Farm Community, 10Kal, and Pasarbella at Suntec City among them – as well as projects all over the region including Stacked (Koh Samui), Elbow Room (Phnom Penh) and Freebird (Bangkok).

One of the most well known is the fact that the studio, which will celebrate its 10th anniversary this year, is also extremely active in the design of hotels and resorts. “The bread-and-butter of what we do at greymatters is hotels and resorts. They pay the bills. Restaurants are a different business. But because hotels take five-to-six years to complete, we are a young studio, I think most people know us for F&B,” he says. greymatters is currently working on 12 hotels, with some in the region – Amari Galle Sri Lanka, Robinson Cub in the Maldives and Puri Resort and Spa in Bali – all inching toward a Q3-Q4 completion.

One of the most interesting side of Barr’s story is his belief in the diversification of the designer’s role in the hospitality arena. In addition to his own activity as a restaurant owner, he established (with his partners) a restaurant management and development company called skin+bones. “There’s a blurry grey line in terms of the type of service we provide in conjunction with greymatters. Sometimes greymatters leads, and sometimes it’s skin+bones. We call on assets from both. Everyone takes the lead in what they do best in a project,” he explains.

Part of Barr’s mantra is having the ability to touch all design aspects of a project – interior design, landscape, identity, kitchen design and F&B concepts (including food and beverage menus and recipes). He explains, “We do love to wrap our hands around the planet [of design], but we don’t say we have to do everything in a project. I really like to experiment. Part of the skin+bones experiment is to do things in our own projects that clients probably wouldn’t allow us to.”

Freebird, the Modern Australian-style restaurant recently opened by Barr and his skin+bones partners in an old house in Bangkok, is an ideal example of this approach. “Freebird has been a labour of love,” he says. “In fact our design studio is on the second floor. The partners all have their own acumen, but I’m the only designer. Till it opened, none of the partners knew what it would look like. It was a true design-build project. No client could go through a process like that. You can only do it when it’s your own project.”

Barr’s goal is to have a 50-50 split between his own projects and his design consultancy work. And he has his sights firmly set on the broad geography of the region to achieve that. “While Singapore and Hong Kong are leaders in terms of F&B concept and design,” he explains, “in terms of business they are increasingly difficult markets because of their high costs. So we’re looking at emerging markets.”

For now, he is enjoying the excellent reception to Freebird. The interior is true to the greymatters style. “We use a lot of architectural materials to create patterns and textures. We do that to an extreme in our own projects. They have to be bold and bright, and we generally do things that have a sense of humour,” he summarises. “Too many things are becoming homogeneous these days. The rate of innovation has the possibility of stagnating if we don’t flip this trend on its head.”

grey-matters.com

Left: Alan Barr’s Singapore studio is also his home. His meeting table has a backdrop of shelves where he displays objects collected for projects and for personal fascination.

Page 64: Freebird in Bangkok was created organically, says Barr, based on the skills and interests of the people involved rather than via traditional forms of market research.

Page 65: Barr’s domestic kitchen is linked to his studio’s meeting space. Meetings with chefs have often ended with experimentations in the kitchen, he says.





Business Diversification The Way Forward For Designers?

"Hospitality is a very volatile business, and when you start to do your own development and ownership, it's also a very expensive business. Most restaurants that there don't work. And part of the reason for that is no one can do it all on their own. That's why we split it into buckets of people who are responsible for different areas. We have various thought leaders in each space. I think it's the way forward, but I like diversity." Alan Barr.