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New York designer gatecrashes the Singapore scene



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WORK, LIVE AND PLAY IN ASIA

AL BARR NONE

Singapore-based New Yorker Alan Barr reflects on his journey from the construction sites of Long Island to creating unique designs here in Asia

WORDS RICHARD LENTON

The Academy Award-winning actor John Wayne once said, "If life isn't always black and white, I say 'why the hell not?'"

It's a typically old-school comment from a man immortalised in starring roles in a plethora of Western movies; a man who wasn't backwards in coming forwards. "Ain't nobody ever seen a cowboy on a psychiatrist's couch," was another line of Wayne wisdom.

The modern world may have been a confusing one for the man born Marion Mitchell Morrison, but despite what this bastion of straight-talking manliness may have thought, life certainly isn't always black and white. There are many, many shades of grey (though not 50, despite what the god-awful book might suggest).

Whatever the shade, grey's not a colour you'd associate with flamboyant, ambitious design; rather, it's usually pigeonholed as drab – more often used to describe dull and overcast weather.

So why would award-winning designer Alan Barr, who relocated to Singapore in 2010 after a successful 15-year career in the design capital of New York, choose the name "greyMatters" for his new, supposedly cutting-edge company?

"There are so many shades of grey that make every day a new adventure," says the 40-year-old American, "although the name is meant to be a bit tongue-in-cheek."

"Hovering in the grey is my personal ethos – there are many solutions to any single challenge. We are much more 'revolution' than 'evolution' in the way we approach design."

Alan launched the company two years after moving to Singapore, with the aim of specialising in all things hospitality. And "all things" really does mean the whole shebang, from the architecture and landscape to designing logos, media campaigns, staff uniforms – even cutlery.

The company recently completed a rebranding and design of the Tippling Club and its new private dining space, Bin 38. It also worked with head chef Ryan Clift on choosing the name, which is typical of the all-encompassing approach that Alan has

espoused during a career that has seen him work on a range of projects, from hotels and resorts to casinos, super-yachts and private helicopters, and to country clubs, nightclubs and spas.

But why did a designer, who was revered in his native New York as the managing director of Zeffdesign, end up relocating to Singapore?

"I sold my firm in New York back in 2009, and was taking a brief sabbatical when I received a call from a local recruiter about a company that was looking to expand into hospitality design," adds Alan, whose projects with Zeffdesign included the Fathom super yacht in Malta, The Venetian Macao's Paiza Suites for high rollers, and the Hard Rock hotel and casino redevelopment in Las Vegas.

"Coincidentally, I was heading to Australia for a friend's wedding the next day, so I stopped over in Singapore briefly on the way home. I didn't have especially high hopes, but after 15 minutes with the CEO I changed my outlook. One month later, I was living here."

Prior to establishing greyMatters, Alan's two years in Singapore saw him enjoy stints as managing director (Asia) for Sydney-based company Chada and creative director of



What makes you stand out?

"I always speak my mind. People tend to cower around others above them in the corporate structure, but I have never bitten my tongue or held back and this is how I expect my designers to act with me. Don't get me wrong – we should always be polite and never curt or rude, but always truthful, even if it shoots your own plane down."

the Blink design group, where he was heavily involved with the development of the Punjab Grill at Marina Bay Sands and the Sanctuary Residence Club in New Delhi.

Despite his achievements in those two roles, Alan's entrepreneurial instincts ensured that his feet remained itchy. Hence the decision to go it alone.

"Being an entrepreneur is all I've ever really known. I grew up in a family where everyone worked for themselves. My parents had their own myriad of businesses, and my siblings and I always had to work in our free time.

"We grew up learning that things didn't come for free, and the real value of a dollar. My father used to take my brothers and me to his construction sites and put us to work while he had meetings. He did this every weekend and over all school holidays, without exception. I think that's where I got my appreciation for how a pile of raw materials actually becomes a building.

"There are so many kids who come out of design school with no idea how a building actually goes together. They've never stepped foot on a construction site, and they know nothing about what is practical when designing; so they come up with these great ideas that are totally impractical to build. If you can't build it, what's the point of designing it? If you truly understand the complexity of construction technology then you can manipulate the design process to always get what you want, and never promise something to a client that they have to give up in the end.

"My experience running around construction sites as a child in Long Island was instrumental. It drove me on to push myself a bit farther each time, with no concern whether success was achieved, but in knowing that I had tried 200 percent."

"My father used to take my brothers and me to his construction sites and put us to work while he had meetings"



Stacked at OZO Samui

Bringing your work home:
Alan's dining room in New York



Despite the positive influence of his parents and the impact his upbringing had on his entrepreneurial development, it did have drawbacks.

"Because I started working for myself straight out of university, it wasn't until I was recruited to Singapore 13 years later (2010) that I realised just how unemployable I am.

"I did try the nine-to-five gig, but it really wasn't for me. There were far too many pedantic rules and restrictions to be able to create anything innovative. I need freedom – or at least a big piece of fenced-in land to roam about in. You could say I am a free-range chicken in Singapore.

"When I started my career in New York I was armed with big ideas but very little practical knowledge, so I made a lot of mistakes. I spent a great deal of time figuring it out as I went along, picking up a few skills and gaining real momentum over the next 13 years. At one point, I had 85 employees and a sizeable design agency, but in the end I got bored because I wasn't learning anything new. My brain was itching for a new experience and a change of pace, because New York just wasn't fast enough any more."

Hence the chance move here. But what's the design scene like in Singapore? Are there countless competitors on the doorstep ready to wage war?

"Having grown up in New York, with so much amazing architecture, interiors, design, fashion, arts, and music, I'm perhaps a little spoilt. That said, I also think that we are at a tipping point for design in Singapore, and the customer is finally starting to demand more. As a result, I believe there is a coming renaissance in design over the next few years.

"There's definitely great local talent here, but sadly there aren't a lot of opportunities for world-class designers to flex their creative muscles. At the moment, too many of the same ideas get recycled over and over again."

Big words from a big fish in a relatively small design pond; but maybe Alan's opinion of the scene in Singapore could act as a call to arms for his rivals. If it does, it's unlikely he'll lose much sleep over it.

"People get so stressed and twisted over things in life that in the long run are inconsequential. My blood pressure never rises in tense situations, and I don't stress out over anything. I'm sure one day there will be a crisis that I need to deal with, but to date life has been great."

Alan's positive attitude is infectious, and it presumably helped him a few years ago when New York was bearing the brunt of the global financial crisis.

"Yes, the whole world unravelled in 2008 and 2009. There were literally a few weeks in that awful time where every day at least one client was calling up to cancel a huge project that was well underway or we'd just started to design. The only projects that were safe were the ones well into construction where

the bank had already lent the majority of the funds. Otherwise it was killing season.

"It was a hard time. I had to make serious decisions about trimming huge numbers of loyal, dedicated and hardworking staff. It was like cutting my own arm off. Still, looking back I'm actually glad that I had to go through it. I learned so much, and now I insulate myself and my staff with a much bigger cushion for if things ever go awry again. You never know when it's going to happen – the global financial crisis was a total curveball. But I think I managed it well, and I still took most things in my stride."

Alan's experiences during this grim period certainly had a bearing on his approach to the way he runs his new business.

"We started with one project and it's mushroomed into the 15-plus projects that we're actively working on. We are debt free, we have a nice coffer of reserves, and we are screaming forward. I can proudly say that the work being produced is some of the best I've ever been part of creating.

"We want to stay small and punch well above our fighting weight. We'll never get caught up in the greed of needing to be number one. Being big means you have to focus solely on making money; being small means you can focus on the love and passion of why you started in this ridiculous game in the first place: to design, and to have the time to be able to pay attention to every



The signature hanging bottle rack over the bar at the refurbished Tipping Club



Bin 38, the private dining area at the Tipping Club

What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

"Don't listen to everything that people tell you. As your career grows you'll have a lot of pundits and critics that all think they know better than you. Develop your career instinctually and not on a textbook formula. Most times, the educated decision from the gut is the correct choice. I am not saying to disregard those around you; just that life gives you a lot of great mentors if you know how to filter through the muddy water of conjecture and opinion."

professional degrees, and a bit of unruly ambition mixed with a large helping of wanderlust. My career has taken on a life of its own. I wish I could say that I had a plan at the onset, but that just isn't true. This has happened organically and sometimes I feel like I'm just along for the ride." ■

last excruciating detail.

"Our immediate next steps include a few of my own food and beverage ventures, which are already in the works. At some point I'd like to design my own resort under a brand that I've been contemplating for a while, but that's a few years away at this point. I've learned from the past never to bite off more than you can chew, so for now I'm holding back until we're positioned exactly where I want us, even though investors approach me all the time. I guess if I make them wait, they will want it more in the end. It's simple supply and demand economics.

"Some people put all their effort into careful planning, but they still can't steer the cart straight. I'm basically an over-educated architect with three