

Hotel Artisans

Ria Vogiatzi - Xenou

Founder & Principal | Elastic Architects

Hospitality Insights Series
Architecture

003



Photo: Spyros Hound Photography

Introduction

Ria is Principal and co - Founder of Elastic Architects. Bringing design dreams to life, her collaboration with ultra-luxury icons like Aman, and a world that's sculpted by her remarkable love for architecture.

Elastic Architects

A London based, international award-winning firm of young architects and international partners, structured to provide architectural, interior and landscape design, as well as construction and construction management services.

Interview

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Bringing design dreams to life with Elastic Architects, her collaboration with ultra-luxury icons like Aman, and a world that's sculpted by her remarkable love for architecture.

Defining luxury, sparking a 'sense of place' and inspiring the hotels of tomorrow

I spoke to Ria on a busy Monday evening and what amazed me was her calm & confident tone in a week that her team had 19 projects underway 4 of which were due in a matter of days! Let's start things from the beginning.

Ria is Principal and co - Founder of Elastic Architects, an Athens - based architectural firm that specialises in ultra-luxury hotels, which started out as a small business in 1996 and now has a team of 64 architects and designers in Greece alone, with offices in London, Toronto, Cyprus and Dubai. She views every new project as a challenge, a quest to evoke certain feelings in future guests; as if the hotel stay is a movie and she is the director.

It all begins at the nearest airport, via a route that's been carefully curated to offer an introduction to some of the area's most scenic landmarks, leading up to the "wow factor": the very first arrival at the hotel itself. A place that Ria and her team have carefully studied and explored to uncover every one of its hidden gems: an ancient tree, a mesmerising view, an otherworldly rock, or anything which may escape the attention of owners but, in the right setting, become one of many remarkable focal points.

Years in the industry have taught Ria that a component of her design doesn't need to be glossy or dazzling to command attention; sometimes, pleasing symmetry or impeccable materials can be enough, or even preferable, for a more timeless result. After all, the firm's motto, elegant simplicity, is one she imbues in her every design, from Aman Sveti Stefan in Montenegro to her newest endeavours with the Brown Hotels Collection.

Though these luxury brands have their design standards, they also appreciate a fresh viewpoint, a "translation" of these guidelines into the current place and time. Elements such as location, regional architecture and the surrounding landscape are fused together with the client's vision for the hotel, and adapted to company requirements, taking their principals one step further to offer the hotel an elusive sense of place, that magical connection to its destination.



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Interview

Kostas Panagakis

Words

Emma Hensley



JANU Montenegro created by Aman

After all, Ria explains that a brand can create a destination:

“How will someone go to the other side of the world to discover an amazingly beautiful destination without the safety of a brand, or the means of experiencing it in an organised way?”

To Ria, it is obvious that luxury brands are capable of moving mountains, or drawing visitors in from all around the planet, as has been seen historically countless of times; various Banyan Tree resorts and Aman in Montenegro, to name a few. During her discussions with Adrian Zecha, founder of Aman, he explained that when guests return to Aman Cavtat after a walk in Dubrovnik, it should be clear to them that the hotel’s relationship to the town is that of a grandchild; a contemporary place with roots in regional architecture, landmarks and influences. In order to achieve this, Ria and her team studied the building’s original layouts from 1934, making meticulous modifications through mathematical equations. The result: a renovated hotel which, if one is in motion, looks just like its ‘ancestor’ but, upon stopping to take a closer glance, reveals itself to be completely different.

As a juxtaposition to this relationship with local design, JANU, Aman’s sister brand, chooses a different route, thus reflecting the nature that surrounds it instead of the area’s architectural traditions.

This ‘sense of place’ which breathes life to Ria’s project is also very present in her travels. During business trips with

her husband, she always makes time to discover the residential areas and people watch; on a visit to Japan for her project for Mandarin Oriental in Taipei, she spent at least three hours on a bench in a local neighbourhood, getting the feel of the area’s personality and culture.

These frequent visits mean that there’s no real need to travel with her husband for leisure, but Ria does enjoy introducing her children to unique locales, with Finland and the Maldives next on her list... She’s already looking forward to lounging under a coconut tree, switching off her phone for once to immerse herself completely in the experience!

When Ria stays at third-party-designed hotels for business, it’s a challenge for her to truly relax as she finds herself appraising her surroundings through a professional point of view. “Within two days my husband and I have already redesigned the hotel,” she admits. Before each visit, she ticks the following boxes when selecting her accommodation: symmetry, good finishes with quality materials, and the top-notch services which she is used to from Aman.



Aman Venice | Italy

This is especially rare to come by because for Ria, each visit to an Aman hotel is like a homecoming, as she's worked closely with most members of their staff; every moment here is like time spent among friends, a high level of hospitality with personal meaning.

This is how she approaches her collaborations, especially with other, smaller clients: a give and take, a labour of love, almost like a marriage, where she offers her know-how from luxury brands to create the most correct and effective design. Ria always ensures each of her clients receives what feels like her undivided attention. "Just like each of my three children, I love all my projects the same".

Nevertheless, behind the scenes there are 19 projects in the pipeline, and 4 for Brown Hotels to be handed in by the end of the year: in Sounio, Agioi Theodoroi, Lemessos and Lykourgou Street. This collaboration is a treat within itself; after even a 7-hour workshop with client Leon Avigad, the entire team is left in good spirits, and having learned a lot as well.

All this and more is just part of the process of laying the groundwork for future luxury. Ria remembers Adrian Zecha's definition of luxury: achieving the same outcome in multiple different ways, like creating a separate scenario for every day. When breakfast is enjoyed on the patio, in bed, on the beach and in the garden, it transforms from a necessity to an experience.

Hospitality has grown to require this, as travellers have become more and more used to 'experiencing' high-end stays through their social media feeds. This has led to heightened hotel expectations, increasing the required skills of architects and sparking elevated design quality.

It's Ria's vision to continue to imbue an impeccable level of inspiration in all her designs, no matter where her passion for architecture may take her; though for this, her ultimate goal is very clear. In the future, she plans to open a new branch overseas, thus creating two separate 'poles' for her business: Greece, her homeland, and New York City, her lifelong dream.