

# THE DESIGN INFLUENCER

Steph Siegle talks to Fulham-based designer **Susie Atkinson** about how she's arrived at the forefront of the interior design world

**F**lick through the pages of *House and Garden*, *Country House* and the travel sections of Britain's broadsheets, or check into one of the UK's most exclusive hotels, and you'll find the name Susie Atkinson appearing with a frequency that denotes her place as one of the Britain's most influential interior designers.

Susie has certainly earned this accolade. She's the woman behind the much-acclaimed design on a range of Soho House projects – the group with private members' clubs across the world – including the original and uber-stylish London media hangouts, Soho House and Shoreditch House, as well as Soho House Berlin and the chic Babington House

in Somerset, the hotel which has hosted the weddings of some of the most famous names in showbusiness. She's also the interior designer for Surrey's newest luxury hotel, Beaverbrook.

We chat at the end of another extremely busy week for Susie; she doesn't often give interviews and yet is thoughtful and eloquent throughout ours, traits I imagine have played a part in earning her clients' trust. While she has a number of celebrity clients on her books, those names remain private, her discretion being another quality that keeps Susie at the forefront of interior design today.

Whilst her impact on the world of interior design is secured, it transpires she could have followed quite a different career path. "Funnily enough, I started out as a cook, became a little bored with that, worked briefly in the City then, in my early twenties, was inspired by my sister-in-law, who worked in interior design, to follow this route," she explains. "I then trained at the Incbald School of Design in London before getting my first job with the iconic designer Chester Jones, with whom I worked for three years." The launch of her own design practice followed in 1994, which grew organically as she raised her family. Initially working from home, she then opened a design studio in Fulham and



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now has an eight-strong team working with her there – although a move to a larger nearby studio is on the cards this new year.

Hotel projects may have earned Susie the headlines and worldwide recognition, but her passion for these projects is shared equally with her love for working on private homes. "I'm lucky I get to work on both residential and commercial properties," she says. "With private homes I love putting the detail on a bespoke project; collaborating with homeowners on their house is really enjoyable. I think it's really important that clients' wishes are facilitated, that I give them my take on their vision and give them access to suppliers that they may not have access to. With hotels there's a little more restriction because of fire regulations, considering the durability of fabrics etc but it's fantastic to be able to work between the two."

Susie – who names the work of Nancy Lancaster and John Fowler (two 20th-century designers whose work epitomised the English country house look) and that of contemporary John Stefanidis as those she particularly admires – considers the style of properties frequently found in south west London rather interesting to work with. Clients have brought her Victorian, Georgian and Arts and Crafts era properties to design the interiors for and, with her signature style looking beyond fast fads and fashion, she focuses on interiors that will enhance the style and history of the building.

"It's important to keep within the bones of the building – for example, if we're working on a 1930s property it's integral to reflect the architecture within the interiors and include contemporary elements along the way," she says. "Adding elements such as accessories and cushions embellished with the latest trends, such as the current fashion for palm leaves, because then it's much easier to change as the trends do.

"I love working with natural fabrics of wool, cashmere, leather, heavy linens, silks and



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velvets; sustainability is important to me and while I'm not against buying abroad, we try to buy British products," she continues. She also welcomes the current trend towards brighter colours. "We're definitely seeing a move towards stronger colours such as yellows, oranges and greens and I think we'll be seeing a lot more red, bright blues and bolder prints featuring, which is always welcome; we like a sea-change," she adds. "But never mauve or purple – I really don't like those colours," she laughs.

A word of advice she does give for anyone building a new property or renovating an existing one is to embed the interior design focus right at the beginning along with the architectural plans. "Architects think a certain way and the same goes for interior designers – the architect may not be thinking about space for curtain holders, they're thinking about heating and plumbing and structure, while an interior designer is creating the look of the house and at how to incorporate a client's lifestyle, so make sure your interiors ideas are in from the start so disappointment is avoided further down the line," she stresses.

It's been a busy couple of decades for Susie, but she shows no sign of slowing down – quite the contrary. Having previously worked on several artistic collaborations, including carpets and wallpaper, she hopes to add to her expanding product range in the new year with a range of chairs, sofas, lighting

and fabric collections – hence the move to a bigger studio. She's also working on design for homes across London and Oxfordshire, as well as continuing with design for the spa and cottages at Beaverbrook and on the design of Horatio's Garden at the National Spinal Injuries Centre in Stoke Mandeville. When she has time, what would she like to work on next? "A beach house," she says simply. "It's something I haven't done yet. I'm happy to do it either here or abroad!"

## SUSIE'S TIPS FOR INTERIORS

- Pinterest is a brilliant way to create a mood board for your interiors ideas – it's a great source of inspiration.
- Consider the light of a room when planning interiors and the way in which a room faces.
- Follow your initial thoughts and instincts – so when everyone comes in with even more ideas, refer back to what you were first inspired by.
- Work with architects from the start on any interior design options you want included.
- Think about your lifestyle when thinking about interiors – Do you like to entertain? Do you have children? etc – and work from that.

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