

Matthew Shang, HASSELL

Matthew Shang has amassed a prestigious portfolio over the 20 years he has been active in the interior design industry, most notably as co-founder of Singapore practice, Distillery, and as a principal at HASSELL, with which Distillery merged in 2015.

What was it that first drew you to the world of design?

I believe an intrinsic part of my attraction to the world of design was that my father was a joiner. Dad physically built much of our home, and as a result, there were always crafted elements throughout. The world of design also opens up to you easily if you are somewhat of a daydreamer; dreaming of new and/or other worlds, which as a child seemed to come pretty easily to me!

Which designers/design movements were inspirational to you when you were first starting out in the industry?

There are two parts to this inspiration. Firstly, self-taught exploration of design history and culture, and secondly, the direct influences from those I work with. My self-taught design education and exploration was, and still is, incredibly important to me. When I first started out in the world of design I spent a lot of time exploring the footprints of both local (Australian) designers and international designers. I remember traversing a suburb to locate a house open for inspection simply because it was advertised as having a Neville Gruzman extension with a Marion Hall Best interior.

Both were local heroes in Sydney, but ones that I discovered through media, friend introduction and simply inquisitiveness.

This type of education continues, with my partner and I buying a modernist house in New Zealand designed by a Czech émigré architect, which has led to further exploration of the rich design history of domestic New Zealand architecture.

As mentioned, I am also hugely influenced by my peers. A former colleague I worked with who was my senior when I was in my first role I am now fortunate to work with as a peer at



HASSELL. Another was the Principal of a small design consultancy where I previously worked, who truly demonstrated the importance of bringing passion to a project and that a great result is achieved through true commitment during the entire design process.

What do you feel really sets HASSELL apart?

HASSELL is a truly cross-disciplinary practice with a cross-region team. With studios and projects across Australia, China, South-east Asia and the United Kingdom, we have expertise across a broad range of sectors from hospitality, urban design, education and science, sport and entertainment, transport and workplace.

We judge the success of the buildings and places we design by the way people use and enjoy them. We know that good design is not only about helping clients meet their needs and objectives, it is also about the way people feel when they experience it, a sense of meaning, connection and belonging.

We combine the best thinking to achieve the very best result. Personally, it is incredibly stimulating to have the ability to draw on the right talent and bringing new ideas to the table, no matter where they are located in the world.

What are you working on at the moment?

We are working on some exciting new hotel projects in Brisbane, which is part of a radical



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new cityshaping development. Locally in Singapore, we are completing a series of projects in the co-working space, which is an interesting one as it very much combines hospitality thinking with the commercial workplace mindset.

What do you feel is the most important lesson you've learnt in the course of your career?

It would have to be the importance of making sure everyone is on the same journey and truly believes in the direction. All team members must own their part of the project, and to do this well they must believe in it passionately.

It is your role as a design leader to instill this discipline in all members, including fellow consultants, while sharing this collective passion with your client.

Could you talk a little about the merger between HASSELL and FreeState, how do you feel it will strengthen the studio's offering?

FreeState are UK-based user experience designers who have collaborated with some of the world's biggest brands including Sony, Nokia and Virgin Atlantic. They are experts in developing user-focused stories, designed journeys and immersive experiences that connect people with brands, each other and places to create a more valuable end product.

This has been driven by a shift in the landscape whereby people are placing a greater value on experiences rather than 'things'. Having FreeState + HASSELL will further strengthen our ability to map an experience journey and create experience-driven master plans.

In hospitality, the experience of a guest, how they feel and the desired response, has always been front and centre, but this takes it even further. With FreeState, we now have the tools and the ability to really define and map out the desired experiences well before we even start talking about the built form with clients – and that's exactly how it should be.

What are you seeing with regards to 'hospitality design trends' in South-east Asia?

I see that the market is becoming increasingly diverse. Hotel brands themselves are adding a huge amount of diversity within their own briefs and the number and types of brands they hold. Individual hotel operators are providing very interesting bespoke offerings; each trying to bring a very unique point of view and vision.



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F&B consultants and operators are increasingly providing interesting new options to an already crowded market.

Our client Proof & Co, for example, have recently expanded from the F&B sphere to retail, with a very unique offer in Proof Flat, providing an interesting and compelling retail forum which is far from the traditional liquor retail experience.

How do you see the future growth of the hospitality industry?

More and more people are travelling and the options for travellers continue to grow. New technology, which is helping to drive online platforms such as Airbnb, enables people to easily curate an interesting and unique journey for themselves.

An example is one group of friends who are planning to stay in twin houses once owned by Noel Coward and Ian Fleming, with another set of friends finding the perfect villa in Greece for a 40th birthday.



Arguably, these choices have always been available but now are so much easier to navigate and curate. This style and breadth of offer should be equally available to an individual staying with a hotel brand.

There has been a lot of discussion recently about how hotels can capture the interest of millennial travellers. What are your thoughts?

It's about providing the right options plus also using the mass of information available on people to predict what might interest and appeal to them. Whilst we can always explore the luxury of materials in a room, a hot cup of tea post long journey (unprompted) or the solo chat with the barman may be the memory that stays with you and gives you a lingering emotional tie with a property.

Whilst the technology allows for the repetitive and administrative sides to become easier and more automated, it's the soft

human touches that need to be emphasised and enhanced. Connections, sightlines and intimacy are always improved by great design thinking.

What would be your dream hospitality project?

Our most desirable projects are those that really make the most of our immense multi-disciplinary offer at HASSELL. It would be a hospitality project that starts with mapping out the experience journeys; which challenges its site (be it urban or resort) in terms of its impact

to the landscape or urban realm; contribution to the community; challenging architectural forms; and of course, boasts impeccable interiors.

What's next for HASSELL?

The next few years are shaping up to be very exciting for HASSELL. Our hospitality offer is broadening, as is the type of work we are undertaking from larger projects through to the occasional smaller jewels, such as the newly-opened Atlas Bar in Singapore.

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The Great Room