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Page Turner

We have, over the years, met a number of Australian designers and architects now doing great things right here. HLW Design Director Bronte Turner certainly fits this mould. As we sit to chat with Bronte, we quickly realise we share something in common; both of us are huge fans of Summer Heights High – Chris Lilley’s brilliant portrayal of life in an Aussie High School – and, on some strange, fantastical level, both of us secretly wish we’d been the series’ rebel-without-a-clue, Jonah Takalua.

more intrigued than ever, we neatly manoeuvre the conversation onto the subject of Bronte’s own school days. ‘I was born in Brisbane – Bris Vegas. I went to a school called Somerville House, which my grandmother and my mother went to – in fact it was an all-girls private school and I was third generation at the school.

‘It was nothing like Summer Heights High – worst luck! We had lurid green uniforms – which didn’t do too much for my style! I didn’t hate the school, but I didn’t particularly like going to school. Arts and graphics were the only things I was really interested in. I had two older sisters who were incredibly academic, and that made me want to rebel a little bit.

‘When I got to the end of school I didn’t want to go to university. I wanted to go to art school, but was told I wasn’t allowed to. To be honest, all I really wanted to do was to travel. Anyway, I ended up going through the university lists and chose my first degree, which

was Bachelor of Business, and I majored in Hospitality Management – because that sounded like fun.

‘I got half way through that, but realised that I wanted something else.’

Bronte had, by this stage, set her sights on something far more creative and, having been told by her parents that she should first finish her degree, decided to head straight back into education. ‘Back then you had to pay up-front for your second university degree,’ she recalls. ‘But I went back to university and got into interior design as a second degree. I had to work full-time whilst also going to university full-time – which I think made me grow up quite quickly. Also, a lot of my friends were finishing and starting new jobs. I felt like I was playing catch-up – and that made me go quite hard.

‘There were three styles of interior design courses in Brisbane back then, and I decided upon QUT – Queensland University of Technology, or University of the Real World, as we used to call it!▶▶▶▶▶▶

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‘I then went on a student placement at this architecture firm – and I didn’t leave there for five years! I finished Uni and started working three days a week and pulled back on the hospitality thing – and was getting paid! It was the best thing I did. It was hard but I walked straight into a job and I was already very familiar with how things worked. I was running my own projects almost straight away – small housing projects and things like that – and one of the senior designers there is now one of my best friends.

‘When you find the right place as a student, it’s just amazing. I had an amazing introduction and had a boss who was brilliant technically. One of my first projects was working on a 70-storey tower. This was an architecture firm and I was doing interiors – so I got to work on everything; multi-res, single-res, hotels, bars, commercial fit-out, showhomes. I loved it. Over here you tend to specialise. There aren’t many practices that are multi-disciplinary, but you learn so much from crossing over different areas of design. It’s great that you have specialists, although it’s also sad that some people easily get pigeonholed into certain areas of design.’

Far from being pigeonholed, Bronte, as she explains, was learning quickly about all facets of interior design. So did these early days influence her career path? ‘I didn’t think I’d end up in the commercial arena,’ she muses. ‘I didn’t really know where I’d end up. I suppose I thought I’d end up working in hotel and hospitality because of my previous background. I’d been working in bars and restaurants and thinking ‘This is badly designed!’ What I realised was that they were designed by people who didn’t then have to go and work in them. That was one of the catalysts for me – it made me realise that I should go back to University and do interior architecture.’

Speaking of those aforementioned University days, Bronte had been part of a European exchange programme some years earlier, and had also spent some time backpacking our fine continent with friends. ‘I always knew I wanted to come back over here to work,’ she admits. ‘Design is really a very new industry in Australia – everything’s very modern – whereas design over here obviously has a huge amount of history and is often governed by what has come before – just look at the fire regs over here! It’s different here – and it’s a great challenge.

‘One of the best things about design is not having an open book. My biggest challenges are having a budget, having a client and regulations or building constraints – this is where the daily challenges for the designer come from. Without these you don’t challenge the client or yourself, and through this you are always learning, however▶▶▶▶▶



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▶▶▶ high up you get. For me, this job is all about knowledge sharing and challenging both myself and the people I work with. Once that stops – you might as well give it all up!

‘Another thing is that – and this is one of the things we always say at HLW – the people who start on a project will work throughout that project. It comes a bit mechanical with some of the larger firms in terms of process; someone takes the brief, that gets passed to the designer and then that gets passed on to the construction team...where’s the ownership? Where’s the pride? It gets lost. One of the things I always want to make sure is that we can deliver the best project at the best price and on time – and be mates with your client at the end of it all. You want to be proud because they’re proud.

‘The hardest thing, at the moment, is that this industry (interior design) is not regulated. You have to remember that this is not a product – it is a service that we’re providing. It’s slightly frustrating that you can’t call yourself an architect in this country without being qualified and going through a huge process. It’s not like that with interior design – you can go and get a diploma and call yourself an interior designer. That needs to change. There needs to be a difference between an interior designer and an interior decorator. There’s no differentiation for the public.’

Bronte made the move to the UK and first worked with Broadway Malyan, before heading on to HLW. ‘London’s always been a bit of design Mecca for us Aussies,’ Bronte grins. ‘For me, it was all about the challenge of the projects I was working on here; I stayed at

BM for almost three years, and my very first project was the American Express headquarters. I would never, ever have so many high profile clients and great challenges in Australia.

‘When I left BM I was looking for a company that really had a passion for design and design detail, but also had the larger mentality. I wanted to work for a firm that was about good design, good team, professionalism, good projects and good clients. So I started at HLW and two Directors almost immediately left – but not because of me, I don’t think! I did one project in Mumbai with them which was really amazing. I learned so much from them, and then they left – and then the recession hit!

‘Then, suddenly, almost overnight, the Royal Mail projects came our way. It was really hard work – we did four projects that first year, in the middle of the recession.

‘I loved being in the position, finally, where I could establish great relationships and friendships with our clients. We’re really proud that we’ve been able to reinvent and reinvigorate tired and old working practices and interiors.’

Now completely integrated and immersed in great project work (we recently showed you Kleinwort Benson and will soon bring you Westpac, to name but two forward-thinking HLW interior schemes), Bronte talks openly and enthusiastically about London, the Olympics, the Gherkin and her desire for greater challenges ahead.

She might not like hearing this (on one level at least) but there’s very little Jonah Takalua about Bronte ●

