

SPACE

INTERNATIONAL HOTEL DESIGN

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NICOLA & BRETT WATKINS

FOUNDERS. BYWATKINS

Not many people would have considered launching their own architectural and design practice during the pandemic that has seen the temporary closure of hospitality businesses across the world, but for husband and wife team, Brett and Nicola Watkins, setting up now has given them an exciting vision for the future. Sophie Harper finds out more about the couple and their shiny new brand, byWatkins.

It's a brave step to leave the security of a solid company to branch out by yourself, but Nicola and Brett Watkins knew the timing was right to put their own name to the interior design and architectural work they have been perfecting for the last couple of decades.

Brett studied at the Mies van de Rohe school of architecture at IIT in Chicago. "It was very detail orientated and space-planning focused, and because it was in Chicago it was freezing but fantastic!" After graduating, he worked for Murphy Jahn Architects. "They had a heavy focus on structural and architectural integration and the engineers were involved in the design process very early on, which was an interesting approach." But in 2008, when the recession hit, Brett decided to up sticks and head across the pond to the UK. "I thought I'd see if I could do a masters degree, so I applied to the Architectural Association in London, where we focused on iterative design processes, which is kind of like taking an evolutionary look at the design process, and got my masters." After graduating, Brett was on the lookout for work specifically in the hotel sector. "The hotel industry had actually always been interesting to me because it really encompasses every kind of programme you can think of in the architectural world, and frankly going to hotels has always been interesting. It's the

scale of them and the international side of things, you know? I ended up getting a job at WATG and I basically learnt how hotels operate, all about good space planning and integrating some kind of local vernacular in the architecture and design in the interiors as well."

Nicola studied Art and Design at Stockport College but it was only when a chance situation came up for her to cover some PA work for her sister that she found her calling as an interior designer. "I didn't know anything about interior design, I'd never met an interior designer before, I didn't really know what they did," Nicola tells me. "Richard Chadwick, who was my sister's boss, had two rooms in this studio where everything was done by drawing board – there were no computers – and I remember walking into his office and seeing all these drawings of a church that was being converted into a vodka bar and I just said 'oh my god', because it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen." Richard became Nicola's mentor for the next four years and taught her everything he knew. "He offered me a job but I wanted to go to university to find my own way, so I got a place at Leeds University of Arts, and because I'd had that experience of working on the drawing boards in a studio already, I knew that was what I wanted to do – it was fate!"



Nicola worked on luxury hospitality at WATG for around four years (prior to Brett's time at the same company), and then joined Target Living before Tara Bernerd formed a new studio under her own name, at which point Nicola became a partner. "I ended up doing a lot of hotels and large-scale projects for the next ten years where my role grew and grew but I was always a lead designer, so I really focused on the design of each project and growing the portfolio. It was fantastic, I worked on some amazing projects and loved working with the clients."

In 2018, with their first child on the way, Nicola and Brett decided to take the plunge and started making the foundations to build their own business on. "We'd both worked with each other's disciplines so much and we know how to work with each other and in the hotel industry, it's something both of us had always wanted as well," says Brett. "We'd always envisioned running our own firms for our entire careers and being able to combine our skillsets made it that much more obvious that we should do it. We can offer more together than we can individually." After setting the wheels in motion – and working out new parenting responsibilities – Nicola and Brett launched byWatkins in October 2020, which has been an interesting

year to say the least. "Obviously working around the kitchen table is a bit different for us, so we're kind of learning to adapt, but the aim is to remain very hands-on," says Nicola.

Both with their own strengths and expertise, Brett is Head of Architecture and Nicola is Head of Interiors and together they're offering a full and complementary package for high-end hospitality and residential projects. They have been working tirelessly to get things right from the off – setting the business up as they intend to run it over the next ten years, which means getting a team together to help support their delivery of presentations and projects, but without handing over the reigns (until their son Howard wants in on the family business that is – although there's a difference of opinion over his preference for interior design or architecture at the moment!). "We'll certainly have a team working with us but the design will come from us," says Brett. "That's right," Nicola agrees, "we are hands on designers, our skills enable us to develop the creative direction, space-planning and architecture from concept to completion; this allow us to really identify, bind and maintain the project. We'll have graphic designers, CAD technicians; creatives to help pull our visions together."



Corinthia Villa Hotel, Abuja, Nigeria



It's wonderful to hear Nicola and Brett talk about their vision for the future of byWatkins. They have this wonderful energy and are a natural and charismatic couple to speak to. Their expertise might be in different fields, but the way they feed off each other and talk about their work as one unit gives plenty of reason to get excited about what the duo will create together. "There's been a trend in the past of very much keeping architecture and interiors separate, but as well as the locale it's really the architecture and the building itself that gives you inspiration for the interior design," Nicola explains. "Nicola's used to working out the details to the millimetre scale, whereas I work on the metre scale, but that's why we work so well together," Brett affirms. "If we're working on a project that requires both architecture and interiors, we'll work on a concept together from the beginning." It gives the couple scope for covering all bases and means they'll have the capabilities to work on almost any kind of project

– from doing a new build from scratch to refurb projects in existing builds or historic properties.

Speaking about some of their favourite projects in the past, both Nicola and Brett agree it's the projects that have taught them the most that stick in the mind, but that every project is special in one way or other, and when your client list has included the likes of Four Seasons, Belmond, Fairmont, and Corinthia, picking just one project isn't an easy task. "I like challenging projects," says Nicola. "I never think anything's too hard and I love learning. One of the most challenging projects I had and did all the layouts for was Herzog De Meuron, which was 58 floors and the building rotated 180 degrees – that was really tricky because I had to do layouts from the top and then change the location of the riser going all the way down to the floor. I also like projects where you go to the site so often that you end up falling in love with the place. When I was working on Sixty Soho in



Thompson Hollywood, Los Angeles, USA



Four Seasons Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA



Corinthia Hotel, Abuja, Nigeria

New York I spent so much time there I felt like I was a part of Soho!" Brett adds: "For me it's probably the Fairmont in St Lucia just because it's in such an exotic location and it was so different because it was so spread out. Just the scale of it – the site was fantastic – it's the ultimate tropical getaway. There were some challenges there which were interesting to solve from a structural standpoint – everything was created on site, so we worked with the structural engineers to create a system to make a concrete that was strong enough. We proposed a structural timber for the second and third floors, which was a new material for me at the time so it was really interesting to learn how that was all made."

It's a lovely insight into their careers as they both talk about what they've learnt and found most challenging over the years, and when I ask them what sort of hotel would be their dream project to work on, they come up with so many ideas they almost don't stop for breath. "It would have to be

a boutique, or a smaller hotel I think," Brett starts with. "Or maybe individual villas on a beach – more like the Four Seasons apartments that sort of crosses the residential-hotel border," says Nicola. "Yeah, you could do a lot with creating one language that goes through it all, there's a lot more to work with when you get into the landscaping on resorts as well." Brett adds. "And the site visits are better!" Nicola laughs. "Maybe a hotel in Machu Picchu – a really secluded place in the middle of nowhere. Something unique." Brett chimes in: "A unique boutique!" Their enthusiasm is infectious, and I can see why they were keen to branch out and work together. I get the feeling we'll be hearing a lot more from this dynamic duo in due course.

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