

Hospitality Interiors

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Top ID Winner 2024 – Mathilde Le Villain

Each year the NEWH UK chapter honours the creative talents of chapter members who are aligned with their mission of supporting scholarship and education with the much-coveted Top ID award. This year's Top ID awards are sponsored by Boss Design and will be held in their Clerkenwell showroom on Tuesday, March 19 at 6.30pm. All proceeds from ticket sales will go towards scholarship awards for interior design students

Words by Rita Bancroft

Hospitality Interiors is delighted to share exclusive interviews with each of the three 2024 Top ID winners. We begin with Mathilde Le Villain, Founder and Design Director of La Villaine.

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

I didn't grow up in a particularly creative family and growing up in a small town of Normandy, I had limited access to anything creative. However, I had it within me. It was natural for me to make things instead of watching TV.

My mother worked in a furniture shop, and she was bringing back some fabric materials or timber samples. So instead of literally playing with my Barbies, I had more interest in making clothes for them or designing furniture that my brother would make for my Barbie dolls house.

Since childhood, I found myself constantly sketching and my imagination flowing effortlessly. I never questioned my desire to create, so felt my world was coming to an end at the age of 15, when art was no longer available in the French school curriculum. This despair actually helped me find my path. My mother supported me in following my passion – we found a special art school for me to study fine art, which led me to study Interior Architecture in France. I wanted to expand my horizon once I had graduated, so I joined a post-graduate course in furniture in Birmingham, UK.

As I didn't feel ready to look for a job and still wanted to improve my English, I joined a European programme, Leonardo, which was giving support to the students willing to do an internship in a European country. I was lucky to find Harrison. The operation director, Kevin Plant, could feel my passion and despite the fact my English was limited, and my computer skills were almost non-existent, he gave me a chance which led them to offering me my first job. I developed there as a designer and a woman, from



a junior to a senior, moving from Birmingham to London. I am grateful for the opportunity I had and all the things I have learnt from many people while working at Harrison.

Two useful things I have learnt are: learn from everyone. As a junior, question the best person for the subject, and "think twice, draw once".

The journey had to end with the pandemic which in a sad way was one of the best things that could happen as it's when I decided to found La Villaine three years ago. After 19 years of experience in the hospitality industry and a lockdown inner conquest, I felt strong, supported, and ready to create an interior design-led studio based on my creative beliefs and values.

How did you get involved with NEWH UK?

I got involved with the NEWH UK chapter when I moved to London with Harrison Design. Kate Mitchell from Timorous Beasties introduced me seven years ago and encouraged me in taking a membership. She has been a huge support, introducing me to many people in the industry. I have learnt a lot from Kate and the way she engages with everyone, her humility and vibrant personality. When I told her about La Villaine, we had some initial conversations about setting up a business and what it takes, which was enlightening. So, when Kate surprised me with the Top ID award it meant the world to me.

I must also mention Jonathan Young, who encouraged me to engage with NEWH across Europe. He invited me to talk on a panel in France, to review the students' portfolio in London, which I took as a great honour and introduced me to the NEWH Milan team. He was also the one who suggested submitting a project for the Top ID – I would have not done it otherwise. And look what happened!

Tell us about your winning project

The first Benihana restaurant came to London in 1986. The brand is well known for its teppanyaki-style cooking and its appearance in many famous American films.

Benihana is one of these timeless brands with a strong food offer due to its exclusivity.

In view of opening the new flagship restaurant in London, we went through renewing the brand image through the design, all in keeping the Benihana Essence.

The concept is based on the Japanese principle of Omotenashi,



the art of hosting with pride and humility and the Wabi Sabi, perfection and imperfection, using the rawness of the materials next to the precision of architectural elements like the screens. And the homage to tradition through an origami ceiling sculpture, some lantern inspired lighting and the use of burnt cedar wood.

The kitchen is basically in the restaurant, as each table has a chef cooking for a group of customers. However, the tables shouldn't feel like a kitchen. They should be inviting for the guests to share and enjoy their meal, all in keeping the focus on the show.

We describe the restaurant as the Theatre and the tables are the central stage for the chefs to perform. Fire, steam, juggling, the light is on the chefs and the energy they bring to the room.

Therefore, we had to surmount technical challenges through the integration of the extraction system into the restaurant. Cassettes and duct rises, all the glamorous things we don't really like to talk about.

Finally, as the restaurant is located in Covent Garden, it was crucial to design a London-centric restaurant, honouring its Japanese heritage and considering the energy of the capital.

How does F&B design differ to other types of design and how does the menu influence design?

The main thing is to understand that designing a restaurant is destined to a target market. In other words, we design for the guests and not literally for the client unless the client is representative of the target market.

F&B design has many elements:

The Narrative: It must complement the food. The food is either the star of the restaurant and therefore, the design is a backdrop for the food to shine. Or the design becomes a full part of the experience and helps with telling the story of the food. In both

ways, the food and the design are interlinked through narratives.

Practicality: The design must be practical and respond to the operation, the flow of the staff, a little bit like on a main road, every user should instinctively recognise in which direction to move to avoid any crash. Also, the materials need to have the required resistance for durability purposes and to be safe to use in a high traffic environment.

Comfort: Not all designs are meant to be comfortable. I was listening to someone speaking about the small chairs he got from China as he just wants the customers in and out. But then comfort depends on the style of the dining, and which end of the market we are designing for.

Lighting: Often we design for different times of the day – brighter, fresher for the lunch time offer and darker and moodier for the evening dining. The fine line is to see just enough.

This is what I love in designing for the F&B industry as I would describe myself as a storyteller, idealist, and artist by nature and an interior architect by trade. I take account of all perspectives of the design.

I also understand that ethics, culture, and sustainability are taking the sector to a deeper level. These are aspects that I value and incorporate to enrich the experience of the end-user. It's essential that I connect the branding and food through true, honest stories – authenticity is essential.

“Benihana is one of these timeless brands with a strong food offer due to its exclusivity”

Mathilde's winning project, Benihana in Covent Garden

Kate Mitchell
telling Mathilde
she had won
Top ID

On a few occasions, I was involved with the menu development of the projects I was working on. I found it fascinating as food is a little bit like design. Balancing flavours, colours, textures, and forms. And if you understand the emotion behind the food, it's easier to express it through the design.

What does winning Top ID mean to you?

Winning Top ID matters deeply; it's a passionate recognition by my peers. And an opportunity to inspire the next generation.

The work NEWH does in supporting the next generation is very close to my heart. I was delighted to be involved in the student portfolio review last year. I occasionally get involved with mentoring, I also had a lecture at my local university, the Camberwell College of Arts, and supported its end of year show.

I was speaking with my mum about what winning the Top ID award meant and we talked about the power of 'transmission through generation'. Through mentoring, my goal is not only to help with design but also to transmit values. I was lucky to have a mum who has strong values and brought me up with them. She was also always speaking about my grandfather in the same term. He was always surrounded by young people as he had a young spirit, as she has, and I believe I have inherited it too.

Who and what inspires you?

As a human being, my mum inspires me as she is a strong woman, with great integrity and kindness. She is consistently happy and wise. Hence why she supported my creativity as she knew it was the only way for me to develop in a career positively. And she

taught me to always work as if I was working for myself.

As a creative, Alex Pataca, the Brand specialist and Graphic Designer who designed the La Villaine Logo and branding changed my designer life. Alex is like a magician. He enchants clients with the narratives he creates. In a short time of meeting him, he brought me



back to what I believed in, which is the dream. He believed in me and my talents. He made me realise what I have in my hands, and I have doubted too many times. He pushed me and made me design things for his projects to express my creativity through different forms. I loved it. It was like playing a game again!

When I told Alex about La Villaine, he insisted on designing the logo. I couldn't dream of anyone better than him. When he presented the branding, he brought me to tears. I never thought a design presentation would have made me feel so emotional. Because he understood me, but he also felt me. He captured my essence and story.

La Villaine is about the ugly duckling, in French, the 'Vilain petit canard'. I felt different to the other kids when I was growing up. It became obvious the day my mum went to buy me some new school shoes. I saw some red shoes which I instantly loved. However, when I went to school, I realised that all kids had neutral shoes... I was devastated. I just wanted to blend in.

Through creating the La Villaine Logo, he empowered me to believe that I have the tools to create a unique design studio with my values and what matters to me. But also, a design studio that listens, shares, and collaborates. Designing is not in front of a computer but through walking, travelling, observing, contemplating... buying books, collecting objects, analysing details, creating stories, giving meanings to things.

And generally, I feel blessed as most people I know in our industry have been highly supportive of La Villaine and I would like to thank you all as without your belief and enthusiasm, I wouldn't be where I am now.

“Through mentoring, my goal is not only to help with design but also to transmit values”

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