



The Resort Maestro

Interview by Peter Myers
Photography by Fee Lee

Bensley Design Studio is the über-creative hive responsible for the crafting of lifestyle resorts, extravagant private residences and resplendent tropical gardens. Any amount of time spent with Bill Bensley, the man behind the designs, reveals that it's his need to have heaps of creative fun that has fuelled the creation of his prolific portfolio, which at the last count includes over 100 resorts in 26 countries.

No one at Bensley Design Studio seemed very surprised when five offers to design large-scale projects were received from prospective clients around the Asia Pacific region and beyond, all in the space of one working day. Eight is the current record. A reason for the nonchalance might be that there appears nothing in the fields of landscape design, horticulture, fine art, interior design or architecture that the studio's 80 staff (the bulk of who reside in Bangkok - the remainder in Bali) cannot achieve.

And, everyone works in the same creatively-infused spaces; enabling continuous cross-discipline learning - which helps create that holistic Bensley magic. Since 2003, the studio's Bangkok HQ has been at the premises of the former Iraqi Embassy, and looks more like a retreat: uncluttered, Apple Mac-adorned work spaces; shelves packed with design detritus that never found a home; outside, a frequently-used swimming pool, gym and bar sit surrounded by *Secret Garden*-esque tropical greenery.

Bill Bensley first came to Asia in 1984 after following his mentor, master architect Mathar 'Lek' Bunnag who shared his class at Harvard. Attempting to work alongside Bunnag at the National University of Singapore, Bensley didn't get the job, being 25 - too young to be a professor. But the very next day he found work at Belt Collins, an American landscape architecture firm, before starting his own studio in Bangkok in 1989. Initially working out of a tiny garage space shared with Bunnag, the two men went on to work together for the next 13 years, designing many resorts through the 90s. Says Bill: "Out of all the teachers I ever had, Lek, although never my official teacher was by far the best." (Bunnag calls Bensley: "The greatest contemporary artist I know. He grows with things around him.")



Bill Bensley found amongst Bensley's Design Studio's abundant outdoor foliage.

Managing only about two days a week in the studio, most of Bill's time is spent on site somewhere around the world: "I really should take more jobs in Thailand; I spend far too much time on the plane," he admits. When at base, Bill is not a desk man; his entire day is generally spent sitting with each of his staff; listening, and giving artistic direction or constructive criticism: "I love what you're doing here, but what about just changing this and altering that corner here..."

For a glimpse of Bensley's work, look no further than any Bill Heinecke property in Thailand: all of the Anantaras (including the just-opened Anantara Resort & Spa Koh Samui); the Marriott resorts in Bangkok and Hua Hin; the Four Seasons Chiang Mai (the ground's just been broken on a new Samui property); and all the Mandara Spas. Beyond Siamese shores, his work includes Sheraton Sanya in Hainan, China; Marriott Mumbai, Udaivilas and Amarvilas in India; just-opened Four Seasons Langkawi; and One & Only Resort's Le Touessrok and St Geran in Mauritius.

Bensley's designs can also (or will also) be seen in Bali, Jakarta, Singapore, the Seychelles, the Congo, Zanzibar, the Maldives, Siem Reap (he is behind the new Hotel de la Paix's famous lobby space which floods on demand to create an indoor

pond), South Africa, Spain, Hawaii... the list just goes on and on. A current project sees Bensley designing the largest residential heated outdoor swimming pool in Beijing, and a willow garden with a series of rock pools; the water heated by thermal currents emanating from a source 3,000 metres underground.

Although Bensley has never been asked to help on a project that didn't include any kind of garden, his work is by no means confined to the outdoors. It was only five years ago that he first put his hand into designing interiors, on the Bill Heinecke-owned Anantara Hua Hin: "Amazingly, Heinecke gave a simple gardener like me the chance to put down my spade and do some interior work," Bensley jokes.

It is a wonder Bensley can sleep at night with everything he has got going on: all the 'fires' he has to put out every day; the endless adjustments; and all the perfectionist clients on his roster that he must appease. Private residences and tourism havens, Bensley designs them both - and, interestingly, both can take similar time spans to complete - from five to 10 years. Bensley's 100 resort projects to date, spread over 26 countries, have averaged out at four to five years each, from drawing board to grand opening.

Although Bill has had a lot of fun catering to the eccentricities of his private clients; given the choice, designing a resort is much more to his liking: "With a private home, to try to cater to the needs of husband, wife, kids, grandma and dad's friends is many times more difficult than dealing with a corporate client, so I am much more selective with the people I design homes for. Also, in order for resorts to keep guests coming back, they maintain their property and gardens properly. I recently finished a home for a client in Indonesia, and after three months of the beautiful house opening it looked atrocious: toys and baby diapers everywhere and plastic-framed kids' photos all over the walls. I worked on that house for seven years, but now I can't take anybody to see it. Hotels don't leave diapers in the lobby!"

Although those who take regular lifestyle resort breaks around the region might recognise a Bensley design, Bill is adamant there is no set formula to his creations: "As soon as we find a formula, we may as well pack up our drawing board and quit. Where would be the fun in that?" Fun, it quickly becomes apparent, is the fundamental driving force in Bensley's world. If, at the outset, a project is deemed to be no fun, he won't sign on the dotted line.

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There may be no formula, but are there any specific themes or influences to his work? “My favourite films, books or pieces of art are those that I can go back to again and again, and each time glean new things. In the same way, I like to design places that I can see many times and not be bored by. My work tends to be characterised by being eclectic, baroque, maximalist. No one’s ever accused me of being a minimalist. And I certainly don’t not take myself too seriously - I like to bring humour to the landscape.”

According to Bill, resorts shouldn’t simply follow what’s happening to their surroundings, and stoop to a minimalistic representation - they should be able to provide a window to the past. He has no problem with properties being seen as more ‘authentic’ than their surroundings: “Resorts are all about escapism, and the more that we as designers can reinforce that idea, the better.

Bill first developed his ideas as to how an Asian lifestyle resort should be conceived in Bali: “Around 20 years ago, the beauty of Bali first struck me and I became a true Bali-phile, reading everything I could put my hands on about the place. I knew Bali from coast to coast and then learnt the language fluently (architectural and spoken!). One of my first jobs was to design part of the Bali Hyatt’s gardens. Made Wijaya, [the pioneering Australian landscape designer, formerly known as Michael White] was in charge of the project, and he taught me a thing or two about the trade; the most important being that

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things Balinese don’t travel well. Try and create a Balinese garden in LA - it doesn’t work. But, if you figure out how to extract the beauty of the extra-special aspects of Balinese gardens, for example, and use them in a different ‘language,’ the results can be stunning.”

Bensley has also found a very strong architectural ‘language’ in Indian, Mexican and Spanish styles; and in his gardens, apart from the prevalent Balinese touches, Javanese, Chinese and Japanese themes are apparent. African gardens have been used effectively in the Seychelles, and Bill hopes to soon crack the design language of Morocco, which he may have the opportunity to use in the near future. Whatever the theme, Bensley’s designs are always unconventional, often amplify the sensual, and hold a special reverence for the tropical climate.

And what would Bill say to younger designers and architects who would love to create a business such as his. “Don’t do it! We’ll employ you! No, seriously, I would say travel. Travel as much as you can, spend all your money travelling. Get a job that allows you to travel. That way, you’ll pick up incredibly diverse inspiration from all over the planet.” If they heed his advice, upcoming resort designers are sure to be ever more in demand, since top-end properties appear to be evolving to incorporate progressively complex design elements, saturated with hedonistic ‘pleasure devices.’

Will Bensley ever throw in his spade and drawing board, hand them over to a new generation of designers, and rest easy at home - his most personal creation, the spectacular suburban Bangkok retreat Baan Botanica - where he resides with his father and partner? “Not likely!” is the maestro designer’s retort, “I want to die with my spade in my hand; I’m not the type who could ever retire.”

We can expect a lot more Bensley-style lifestyle resorts to appear in well-appointed corners of the world in the future, infused with bucket-loads of fun and extravagance. 🌍



Bensley Design Studios

Tel: + 66 2 381 6305

bensley@mozart.inet.co.th, www.bensley.com

Bill Bensley’s first book, which profiles many of his lifestyle resorts, is *Tropical Paradise* (published by Page One; available at all good bookshops). He is currently putting the finishing touches to his second book, *Barefoot in Paradise*, which covers later work on both private residences and resorts, with exciting future projects also revealed.