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Designing for the inn crowd

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With a practical approach and an international outlook, Jo Laurie is in hot demand for her work behind bars

The Brit-pack of London-trained chefs has descended on Melbourne's sharpest restaurants, but in Sydney and Perth it's the handwriting of English designer Jo Laurie at work on the cities' bars.

Laurie made a name for herself as an interior architect in London with supersonic speed. Graduating in Psychology from Manchester University, she immediately went to work as a jewelry designer in New York. Then the investors in a London bar, Ny-lon, called. They wanted Laurie to redesign Ny-lon.

Her design tactics were radical. She sliced the top off a dozen department store dummies and transformed the legs into bar stools. "I was big on body parts," she says.

But her blend of bohemian chic, wit and improvisation was to be her springboard to success in an altogether new field. Overnight Ny-lon was super-cool and in 1997 won the Time Out "Best Bar in London" award. More importantly, the money poured in for the beleaguered backers of Ny-lon and Laurie too had currency. Three more London bars were in the offing and her work has now translated to Sydney's Paddington Inn and Burdekin Hotel and to Perth's Club Bayview and Leederville Hotel.

Laurie's view is that the last thing young people want to do when they finish work is go somewhere serious. Instead, they want "escapism, whimsy, something stylish and visually entertaining".

"A lot of designers and architects have never worked in bars and they don't realise the object is to make money," Laurie says. "Design isn't rocket science."

Following the success of Ny-lon, Laurie went on to design neo-classical Babuska in Islington and a pseudo-Moroccan bar, Barzaar in Camden Town. Last year The Evening Standard voted her bar Oblivion, in Clapham, as one of London's "top 10".

"I made my clients rich," Laurie says. "This is not about designer egos but about making money. The returns have to come back as quickly as possible."

Clearly even the best bars can have a limited lifespan, as one of Laurie's is now a Paul Smith boutique. "You want to be red-hot, not white-hot," she says. "When you're red-hot the clients come and stay. When you're white-hot the fashion crowd comes and before long they move on."

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it's over.

On a recent trip to Sydney, Laurie called Bruce Solomon at Paddington Inn because she liked the hotel and saw possibilities. Solomon says he wanted "something outside the envelope" and employed her to redesign the bar. To this end she designed "tusk chandeliers" for the front bar, suspended glass clouds for its back bar and in a smaller club room installed Chesterfields and covered a chimneybreast with prints by Gainsborough and Constable - glued and lacquered into place.

Word passed and Colin Parris, owner of The Burdekin, also called. "I was impressed with her work at the Paddington Inn," he says. "I wanted to keep The Burdekin at the cutting edge and so without masking Mark Newson's original designs [done 10 years ago] she came up with some very good ideas including a 'caterpillar' table design, allowing the tables for two to fit together to seat six or eight or more. The reaction to her work is good. The trend is there."

"I imagined, with all I had read of Sydney, that it would be like a New York of the Southern Hemisphere," says Laurie, snug on a banquette in the Paddington Inn. "In fact, there's a strict norm and any variations on the norm are a bit scary for the investors. There's a lot of white. It's very safe. I think there's a small cartel of businessmen who invest in restaurants and want only certain established designers to design them. It's their safety net."

She sees room for more eccentricity. In "big" cities like New York and London, she says, "you have that top level of design and you have a second tier, an idiosyncratic, individualistic style," she says. "I design from an organic perspective, I source or make lighting, chairs, tables and fittings." And no, she's not driven by designer names, which keeps costs down. "I'm detail-orientated but that doesn't mean the design itself has to be taken too seriously or that it isn't well executed."

"You want the clients to come to a bar and stay. If they're drinking a beer it's fine to stand around, but if they're drinking champagne and cocktails you want to give them an interesting environment."

Her design ingredients? "First of all, design is international. My bars could be anywhere in the world. I don't design a bar thinking I am in London or New York."

What about the spatial aspect, the fact the Japanese can sit in cosy confines while Australians prefer more space? "My motto is more simplistic about space. It's about how much money that space can make for the client."

Laurie is concerned about the future of the Australian pub culture. "I don't think people in general want to go to a pub with poker machines," she says. "They're for the landlord but I wonder how good they will be for the long-term pub culture in your city."

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