

# BOUTIQUE design

HOSPITALITY REINVENTED

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## DOUBLE THREAT

SUNDUKOVY SISTERS  
GOLD KEY DESIGNER OF THE YEAR

# S + S = SUCCESS

Fourteen years after launching Sundukovy Sisters, Irina and Olga Sundukova have become overnight sensations in the hospitality design business. Find out why their knack for putting fun into function and free-spirited artistry into form is earning them top spots on the short lists of some of the world's biggest hotel brands and buzziest independent hoteliers and restaurateurs.

BY MARY SCOVIAK

**SOME ENTREPRENEURS** set out to be too big to fail. Twin sisters Irina and Olga Sundukova wanted to be too good to fail. "Our goals were never about making as much money as we could or having the biggest design studio on the planet," they say. "From the beginning, we were determined to focus on projects that interested us and to create what were, to us, our team and, hopefully, our clients and guests, the best projects in the world."

Apparently, they got ample buy-in on the money and consumer preferences sides. Their Moscow-based design studio, Sundukovy Sisters (S + S for short), has a headline-grabbing portfolio of more than 30 hotels and over 70 restaurants and bars, a team of "60 passionate people who are crazy about design" and armloads of awards including 2018 Gold Key Awards for Excellence in Hospitality Design for Best Lobby Upscale and Best Restaurant Casual Dining and being named the Gold Key Designer of the Year.

So how do two millennials who are working moms, frequent travelers (one or both are usually OOO on a weekly basis) and hands-on creatives/managers become the next likely household names in the international hospitality design industry? Read on.



OLGA AND IRINA SUNDUKOVA

## WHAT IT MEANS TO BE DESIGNER OF THE YEAR

**IRINA AND OLGA SUNDUKOVA:** We still can't believe it! We think that the award is for our future achievements—that the judges wanted to inspire us, to motivate us, to recognize us, not for what we have done, but for what we could do in the future. This means that we have to think seriously about what to wish next!

## HOW THAT'S IMPACTING THEIR BUSINESS STRATEGY

One of our most important accomplishments in 2018 was learning to say no—even to our most beloved clients, even to friends—if a project doesn't fit our vision. If there's any advice we'd give to young designers it would be, "Don't waste your time creating projects you don't like." That's not good for your business or your clients'. Your body of work needs to inform clients about what working with your studio means. We believe that if a client chooses us, he or she is ready for a bit of craziness and bold design.

## HOW THEY GOT THEIR FIRST BREAK IN HOTEL DESIGN

We got our start in residential design and then moved into designing restaurants. That got us noticed by AccorHotels, and they asked us to design a hotel. At our first interview, Accor's team told us that they were quite confident about our proposed concepts for the lobby and restaurant but had doubts about our design for the guestrooms. We were surprised—OK, offended—to hear that because we'd successfully created so many residential bedrooms! They helped us understand that a bedroom in a person's home and a hotel guestroom are completely different stories. And, we helped them see that our experience with private residences could bring a more livable, home-like feeling to the guestroom.

## WHAT ELSE THEY'VE LEARNED

When we began designing hotels, we were very attentive to brand standards. We followed every directive, including placing every piece of furniture the way the standards said. We later realized that, first we should learn standards, and then we should break them. Now, even hotel companies' design and operations executives are asking us to push ourselves. They understand how important it is to improve and



MERCURE KALININGRAD



20 EXCHANGE NEW YORK HOTEL (RENDERING)

always look forward. The basic rule is to stay within the brand's DNA, rather than its platform, and justify thought-provoking concepts that talk to guests in their own language. That's how the zebra and giraffe artworks came to inhabit the lobby of the Hotel Pullman Berlin Schweizerhof near the city's zoo.

#### HOW TO BUILD DRAMA WITHOUT BEING THEATRICALY ABSURD

Our interiors are distinctive and bright. We follow one simple rule: Design should be relevant, even if it's an illuminated sheep (yes, we used this in the Ibis Styles Tbilisi). We love joking that we are minimalists, but the trait is hidden so deep in our souls that we still haven't managed to reveal it. We try to adhere to the principles of Michelangelo who said that the secret of a perfect sculpture is to get rid of all unnecessary material. Our add-on: self-irony is essential to excellence in design!

#### SOME TRADE SECRETS

Every country has its own peculiarities for shop drawings. For the Pullman Berlin Schweizerhof, for example, they accepted the drawings for the zebra sculpture only after it was done perfectly down to the millimeter. The piece took us five rounds of corrections because a local company was sending us a

drawing that didn't exactly match our initial proposal. Finally, they gave up and sent us an open file. We learned how to work in their programs and made a perfect drawing. We also mock up every artwork and customized piece of FF&E. Before we specify a new upholstery fabric or other textile, we first try it out at our office, do several washings to make sure that the print or color will resist running or fading and ensure that it holds up under heavy usage.

#### WHAT'S ON THEIR BOARDS

Before the end of the year, we're opening four restaurants: Estiatoria Keia restaurant in Hong Kong, Chalet Berezka and Osh La Mer in Dubai and gastrobar Lucky in Moscow. We're also working on a mini-hotel concept for 20 Exchange Place in New York and several other branded properties as well as a proposal for a resort.

#### THE NEXT HOT CONCEPTS IN HOTEL DESIGN

Multifunctionality and fluidity. There have to be spaces for everything and everyone. Smart, not complicated technologies. All tech should be user-friendly. Intuitive design. Coliving. The hospitality interiors of the future should host both visitors and locals.



RESTAURANT VOSKHOD MOSCOW

### WHAT'S ON THE MENU FOR RESTAURANT DESIGN

A restaurant should become a community, not only a place to eat, but a place where people meet, speak, interact, watch movies, read—a place for people, much like hotel lobbies. So, restaurants, too, will have to be adaptable and flexible to suit various applications and guests' moods.

### THE MOST USEFUL TOOL IN THE DESIGNERS' KIT

Lighting. It can make any interior fabulous or spoil everything.

### THEIR LOVE-IT, LOATHE-IT LIST

We love projects with imperfections like too many columns, a lack of natural light or ceilings that are too high or too low. Working on a heritage building, with all the regulations and restrictions, is not an easy task but, for us, it's really fun. Constraints inspire us. Looking for ways to overcome problems allows creative solutions to appear.

What we loathe? Design concepts built around one top trend or some artificial "of the moment" reference. We concentrate more on organic change and believe that successful design should be based on what's real—and also on consumer mega trends. You can't ignore shifts in public thinking. Our caveat is

to try to predict how trends affecting people's wants, needs and habits will change, not to blindly follow them.

### WHETHER BEING A RUSSIAN FIRM IS A POLITICAL CHALLENGE

We have a positive outlook on society. We believe the modern world is made up of personalities, not territories. Even a person from a small town is no longer an outsider. With all the connectivity, he or she can share their talent with everyone. We probably don't realize, and sincerely don't care, how "people" perceive us. In our work and in our lives, we live in a kind of perfect world where everyone shares the same language about design, art, experiences and so on. Obviously, we realize there are a lot of people who see divisions by country or politics. Our view is that we just need to think around that and do what we can do well: create.

### WHAT KEEPS THEM ON TRACK

Our families; working with each other—we have the same tastes; a commitment to working five days, then taking two days off; having a team we trust, especially since we travel a lot for business; escaping to our country house and dancing in the moonlight. ●