

DESIGNER PROFILE

MONIQUE TOLLGARD

MONIQUE TOLLGARD TALKS TO EDITOR JADE TILLEY ABOUT HOW HER LOVE OF COMMUNICATION HELPS HER CONNECT WITH CLIENTS AND BRING THE BEST OUT OF EVERY PROJECT



Monique Tollgard is a Co-Founder of Tollgard Design Group, alongside her husband Staffan.

Monique and Staffan launched their design studio in 2005. Focused on delivering interior design services to an international clientele, the practice quickly garnered recognition for its bold take on contemporary design. Since then it has expanded into a multi-disciplinary studio that employs some of the brightest minds in the industry. Here, Monique shares her personal experience of entering the design world.

What is your earliest memory of design having an impact on you?

I am reminded of two childhood memories, one good and one bad. The good is the recollection of my grandparents' house; they had an orchid farm in Johannesburg with hothouses dotted amongst an impressive collection of cycads and trees. On every wall, shelf and corner in the farmhouse were wonderful arrangements of treasures they had found and curated along the way, from truly impressive pieces down to collections of teaspoons. I remember vividly an elephant's foot full of hand-carved walking sticks that my grandfather had collected from all over South Africa. When they eventually moved into a home more manageable for them in old age, the whole collection went with them, just arranged much closer together! I think the power of collecting has really stayed with me as I've grown. Staffan and I really disagree here; he is a minimalist, very selective designer and I secretly have the DNA of a hoarder.

My second memory of design is an old green mohair sofa, which was so uncomfortable and felt horrible on my skin. To this day I still rub

fabric samples against my leg as a test of softness and comfort.

I'm quite emotionally attached to things, even now. I have a collection of old stinkwood bowls in my house that came from my grandparents' home; they have so much memory embedded in them. For our wedding, we were given a Leopard stone sculpture from Kirstenbos botanical gardens; unusual objects are a thing in our family, and I have taken that thread with me in life and continue to weave it. Wherever I go I buy something that brings that place and associated memories home with me. Home is so very important to me. When designing, I draw on the principles of how clients want things to feel. I think so often we can give off 'don't touch' vibes, don't sit there, don't move that, but actually, good design should be loved and touched and sat on and in. When we work with families we try to understand how to make them happy. I guess this notion reflects back to my childhood memories of how happy my grandparents were to be surrounded by all their things, their treasures.

Where did you study design and what did you specialise in?

I studied interior decoration at Inchbald School of Design. Nico Springman was my tutor, a fantastic teacher who made colour into a science and an art. I have never forgotten his lectures.

I have come at this profession from a different approach to a lot of my peers. My background is in English Literature and then documentary-making before moving into design, so I feel very experienced at listening to people, researching and editing to tell a story. I'd say I'm more of a communicator who understands the principles of making design work. Within the studio I am surrounded by a wonderful team who can draw beautifully, my skill is in holding multiple ideas in my head and finding a solution and bringing about change to make something better, not just different. It was Alain de Botton in *The Architecture of Happiness* who said 'It is architecture's task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be.' We ask ourselves, can I in an emotional, philosophical and visual way, be a better person? I think translation and interpretation is so interesting. As a designer, I feel that being a linguist is no bad thing at all, it helps me understand and translate the needs of my clients.

How has design education changed since you studied?

Studying at Inchbald was a very specific melting pot experience of people and of past professions, many of who had come prepared to invest in new careers. Something I have noticed is how specialist the industry has become in response to the industry itself. I see an evolution of education, which takes students down one avenue to suit this new preference in the industry.

I'm still interested in generalism, the work of the left part of our brains and the right as valuable and differing skills. Staffan is a great example, he studied engineering, left to be a filmmaker and is now a designer. I look for that eclectic mix in people when I employ. I always think with relation to design, you never know what or who is coming through the door, so I need enthusiasm and diversity in my studio, to be prepared for whatever might arise. I've actually been thinking a lot about the different types of brains and how this plays into my practice. As a workplace you have varying different needs of people, some want quiet, some thrive in noisy and sparky environments, so how do we bring all those things to our own studio and to the work we produce. If anything, I'd say we are now bringing a residential sensibility to the workplace.

What kind of designer did you aspire to be and who are your inspirations?

I joined Staffan's business straight out of design school. I had witnessed him set up his film company and then his design practice and it looked like so much fun. I think, fundamentally, my aspirations as a designer have always been aligned with that of the business and therefore with the client. We have a chameleon portfolio, rich and varied with design answers, but the trick is getting it right for that one client in that one moment in time. I was the girl at school who liked to get the gold stars and even now, I want gold stars from my clients. I want to know that I have got it just right for them.

After projects there is that sense of joy when receiving testimonials from happy clients. If it photographs well, that's great, but there is nothing like a written testimonial and some genuineness make me cry to know that we brought a little joy to their lives. For this reason, much of my inspiration lies in the family lives of the clients, creating happiness for them. I am also inspired by my own family; my mother, my grandparents, Staffan. Then there is Christian Liaigre and Joseph Dirand whose work I love and other designers who I respect enormously but have a very different approach to mine: Vincent Van Duysen, Michael Anastassiades and Patricia Urquiola. I think these designers are proof that if you have a point of view about design you can achieve anything.

What was your first professional design commission?

It was a project for a husband and wife who were actually my bosses that I left to study design. I was eight months pregnant and they hired me to refurbish the ground floor of their Wandsworth home. I was so incredibly grateful that they believed in me and my ability to bring something special to the project. Of course, my previous work had helped me, as they knew what I could do in terms of documentary making, but I had a lot to prove. I guess they saw the similarities that I see - lots of research, pulling clues together, and then ruthlessly editing them in order to tell one story.



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What has been your biggest design commission to date?

We have worked on some massive family villas abroad, really enormous square footage in some of these projects. One in particular was a villa in Riyadh. Working through Skype and email this was an interesting project for many reasons, beyond the scale. In Riyadh it seems that the method is to build it, knock it down and start again until you get it right. The enormous and multiple living spaces eventually made me feel that bigger does not always equate to better. A real positive from the design journey was that our client did not want cut-off spaces, so we felt that we were almost helping to promote equality through design decisions. All living spaces were equal and open and the end result seems to have emotionally and physically disrupted the traditional living experience. Our research in Saudi revealed the house to be a woman's entire world. You are cocooned environmentally and culturally and when we visited we grew to understand how much time is spent in the house and therefore how the design has to incorporate using different parts of the house for different parts of the day. With this in mind, I understood the importance of why a larger house footprint is so important. The biggest project in terms of learning curve was for an international, very design conscious couple. Our clients wanted cutting-edge tech and a minimalist aesthetic – squeezed into a crooked, listed Victorian house, against a strict budget and aggressive programme. I think this is one of those projects that taught me the most about design.

How would you describe your studio?

We started life in a much smaller studio, we'd take our dogs into work and it was a very intimate environment, but we got bigger and bigger as our projects got bigger. We then found the design studio at Grosvenor Waterside (where we are now) with a mezzanine level to house the design practice and a beautiful showroom to showcase Staffan's ever growing collection of brands and treasures. Note that Staffan's collection gets four metre height ceilings and the design team 2.3m at a push. It's a really happy company; the older I get, the more like a mother hen I become. We spend so much time together, we celebrate milestones and anniversaries together, it's really close-knit. We are energising, collaborative, creative, intuitive, with lots of chatter. I do like a little bit of noise and I am very much the cheerleader in the group. I should probably include that on my business card! My father worked for Disney for a long time and he always encouraged my brother and me to find the path with a heart. Something that engages you emotionally and that you love doing. I hope that our studio is one with heart. And soul.

What are the key characteristics you look for when bringing new talent into your studio?



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A good work ethic: I'm a believer in enthusiasm for the job. One of our best people came to us to intern as a product designer. One week he stayed with us until gone zam (we'd bitten off a little more than we could chew). His enthusiasm got him the job as I hired him the next day. I think you need to see a basic level of competence with CAD etc and with that a commitment to the industry, a love of communication and collaboration. At the heart of it all is kindness. Everyone has to want to sit next you at the Christmas party.

Where is the majority of your work based, and how has travel helped to shape and influence your ideas on design?

We've done a lot abroad recently, because London is such an International hub, it gives us the international work. I'm currently working on a project for a client in London who also has a place in the Hamptons and Staffan is working on an island off Denmark. London has been great to us in that respect. Everyone has unique living requirements and when working abroad there are different ingredients and different answers and responses to the questions asked. I think you exercise a different creative muscle working abroad. Riyadh is an example, we had a huge problem with hanging wallpaper, so we had to step back and rethink how to solve the problem. I lecture at Inchtald and I often say to the students 'get paid to make mistakes' because it is a long road ahead of varying challenges, you need the experience of it all before you can set off on your own.

What do you think should be a key focus for designers moving forward in 2019?

It's very hard to speak for all designers, but this question made Staffan and I think about what we, as designers and working parents, should be doing with a slightly longer-term view than we normally do. We decided that we should be asking ourselves what we genuinely enjoy doing, where our talents and experience best serve our clients; how we best add value. It's been a rocky time for the last few years for Britain and beyond, economically, socially, environmentally. We want to take stock of where we are, and where we want to be heading in 2020 and after that. To make sure that we are still on our path with a heart!

If you hadn't become an interior designer what would you be doing?

I don't think I would still be making documentaries, my old boss actually said my writing made him lose the will to live! I have been an actress but I don't think I would return to that either. I'm too thin-skinned for the twitter and Instagram instant review culture. I think perhaps I would be a teacher, maybe not of English but maybe design. There is nothing like a captive audience to communicate to.

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