

IN PERSON
RÓISÍN LAFFERTY
CREATIVE DIRECTOR,
KINGSTON LAFFERTY
DESIGN

CAOIMHE GORDON

In terms of the office side of things, definitely, there needs to be a reason for people to go there," says Róisín Lafferty, creative director and founder of Kingston Lafferty Design. "And the reason can't be just to do their work. That's no longer good enough."

Changes to the world of work during the pandemic have proven advantageous for her agency, which designs both residential and commercial properties.

"That's been good in terms of getting away from the standard, boring, repeated office," Lafferty says.

"Boring" is certainly not a word you would associate with the projects completed by Kingston Lafferty Design – or its flamboyant creative director. When we met in a Dublin cafe last week, Lafferty was wearing a grey pant suit covered in large dark polka dots, and sporting a distinctive turquoise ring on her finger.

She grew up visiting art galleries with her grandfather, a beloved ritual that contributed to her awareness of how certain spaces made her feel.

"There were different spaces I would gravitate towards and wanted to spend time in," she says. "Art galleries were so calm and tranquil."

When she realised that creating spaces that would evoke such strong emotions was a career path she could pursue, Lafferty first studied interior design and furniture design in DIT (now Technological University Dublin) between 2005 and 2009.

"I graduated first-class honours, but it didn't matter because it was very much the recession," she said.

A master's degree in product design and spatial design then took Lafferty to London. "After my master's, that's, again, still recession."

Catch-22, Lafferty discovered after her graduation, in 2010, that in order to secure an unpaid internship in this field, she would first have to gain some experience.

As a result, she returned to Ireland with future business partner Susannah Kingston in what was originally planned as a couple of months to gain some hands-on experience, first in the construction industry.

However, one project soon led to the next, with the power of word-of-mouth in the local market propelling the pair into ever-larger design jobs. As a result, the Dublin-based Kingston Lafferty Design was founded.

They started with smaller jobs, "some commercial, some residen-



Róisín Lafferty of Kingston Lafferty Design at the firm's Cobalt Townhouse project. Photo: Barbara Corscio

‘People want hotels to feel more like home, they want their house to feel like a cafe or a restaurant’



Kingston Lafferty Design projects: above, **The Schoolhouse** – in collaboration with Helena McElmeel Architects; right and below left, **The Farm** – in collaboration with DMVF Architects; below right, **Cobalt Townhouse** Photos: Barbara Corsico and Ruth Maria Murphy

tial, we very much learned on the ground”, Lafferty says.

“We got a big job, a residential job, where we were the lead professional team even though we were very inexperienced, and we had to appoint all the different consultants for that job.”

While Kingston eventually returned to London, Lafferty remained at the helm. The team has now grown to 16 people, with Becky Russell as chief executive, focused on the operations side of the business.

This ability to embrace fresh challenges – ranging from a beloved home to a workspace – has remained pivotal to the agency’s growth internationally. “I didn’t want to be pigeonholed into one type and I still don’t. That’s what sets us apart,” Lafferty says proudly.

She oversees all of the projects completed by Kingston Lafferty Design, engaging with her project teams and clients and developing the initial concepts.

The business offers a separate pro-

urement service for clients to secure accompanying furniture, for a separate fee. “That’s if you want to go down the ‘one stop shop’ type job and ideally that’s what we prefer to do,” she says.

For some projects, items have to be secured from up to 50 suppliers. “From a logistics perspective, it’s time consuming.”

The agency doesn’t need to go out looking for work – all projects come directly to them, leaving Lafferty in the happy position of being able to pick and choose which opportunities to take on.

As the demand rises, she says the agency does not accept every offer. “It would be very easy to be busy all the time, but not necessarily creatively stimulating,” she says.

Founding a business in the middle of an economic downturn is proving beneficial for Lafferty today, because when embarking on those earlier projects, she had to develop a savvy approach.

“I’m obsessed and it passes on to my family as well. There are reasons for everything and how different spaces make you feel”

“Clients hadn’t big budgets,” she says. “It was all about design and creative thinking.”

Despite working in the field for almost 14 years, Lafferty is not eager to dwell on past projects.

“We like to create something that hasn’t been done before,” she says. “We don’t like to repeat ourselves and I never wanted to.”

“By working in both commercial and residential, you actually bring different lessons and different learnings from both to each other.”

There are also a number of ironies she has noted throughout the process. “People want hotels to feel more like home,” she says. “People want their house to feel more like a cafe or a restaurant.”

Commercial jobs take a lot less time than residential ones, she says. It’s all about the motives of the owner or developer. “They want to have a profitable business,” she says. “The design is usually their main draw, it’s their main marketing piece. With

commercial stuff, there’s often the challenge or the conflict of their operation side of things and you’re trying to balance.”

During the pandemic, fresh issues emerged as supply-chain challenges delayed the delivery of items needed for some projects. “The times might have gone from 12 to 20 weeks in some cases,” she says. “But that’s lessened now.”

Previous projects include student accommodation, clinics, restaurants and offices in Ireland and beyond.

The company is now looking at its third Base & Boon nail salon location in Saudi Arabia.

It is also involved in designing co-working spaces in the American market alongside Malin, a US company that specialises in this area.

“Malin is the co-working brand but Orior Furniture, based in Newry, do all the manufacturing for (the spaces),” she says. “(Offices) have to be more interesting spaces,” she insists.

It is a mission that is fundamental to her vision. At the moment, Lafferty is working on the redesign of the agency’s new office in Fitzwilliam Square, in Dublin, a project she is particularly enthused about.

“We have a large building, and something that I’ve been working on in the background for a number of years is a series of furniture and lighting collections,” she says.

An appointment-only luxury gallery showcasing the agency’s wares is planned as part of the project.

The collection, which is being manufactured in Ireland and Italy, is set to officially launch when the gallery opens.

Residential projects differ hugely from commercial work, with some taking up to four years, according to Lafferty. “We do full interior architecture,” she says.

This means the team is involved from the very beginning of a property’s build to the eventual big reveal.

“You’re fully invested in the vision and then, as it comes to life, we would be fully involved right down to the art on the walls, the furniture, you’ve got this obsessive interest.”

Usually, clients are involved at each stage, but Lafferty also has experiences of only bringing in clients at the very end of the project to see the finished product, with the big reveal amplified by the customers’ favourite scents and songs.

“That’s incredible, but rare,” she says. “When you got right down to the crockery, the glassware... If you can imagine, you’re creating almost a sense of theatre.”

“You’re considering all aspects and all touch points as they (the clients) meander through that space,” she says. “That’s pretty amazing.”

This year, some “large high-end” residential projects will begin in America. Lafferty is excited about the scale of potential projects there, and by the appreciation for collectible furniture and artwork evident among clients.

While Lafferty often visits sites of projects outside Ireland, the ability to work remotely – aided by drawings, 3D renders and video walkthroughs – has proven invaluable to the company’s international expansion.

For now, however, her expert eye continues to scrutinise spaces closer to home.

“I’m obsessed and it passes on to my family as well,” she says, explaining that she is constantly analysing wherever she visits, a habit now adopted by her mum when they visit restaurants together. “There are reasons for everything and how different spaces make you feel.”

