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WE CHATTED WITH AWARD-WINNING HISTORIC PRESERVATIONIST, INTERIOR DESIGNER AND AUTHOR CHUCK CHEWNING ABOUT HIS PAST AND PRESENT ENDEAVORS AND WHAT'S NEXT FOR THIS SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN

How did you become interested in historic preservation? I have always had a love for history and architecture. I started out as an architecture major at Georgia Tech, then transferred to SCAD [Savannah College of Art & Design]. I double-majored with a degree in historic preservation of architecture and a full interiors degree.

What was your first job out of college? I moved to Atlanta and started working for an LA-based luxury hospitality firm, HBA. That sort of kicked off my career, and I began working with Starwood, Ritz-Carlton and Rosewood...all the major players. I went on to the London office in 1999 and then to Milan in 2000.

You changed things up in 2008 when you joined Donghia as the creative director. How did that come about? Rubelli had just acquired Donghia, and they called me and asked if I would consider becoming the creative director at Donghia. They had interviewed other candidates, but what impressed them, I think, was my approach to the company. I wanted to treat it as a preservation restoration project—to look at it historically from a design standpoint, to take it back to its roots and reposition the company based on the design philosophy of its founder, Angelo Donghia.

You consider the 2013 restoration of the Gritti Palace in Venice one of your greatest accomplishments. How did you land that project? During the economic downturn, I was working half the time for Donghia, which allowed for my own design projects. That's when Starwood called and asked if I'd be interested in doing the restoration of the Gritti Palace. I was able to do that project while I was still working at Donghia, and we were able to interface Rubelli textiles into the project, which made sense since Rubelli is a Venetian family company.

After living in major cities all around the world, what prompted the move to Savannah? I had returned to Savannah to do a presentation at SCAD. I literally had not been back since I graduated, but I was just so impressed with the city and how it had developed and changed and grown. I ended up buying a house in 2011, and, while I was living in NY, I would fly down on the weekends. I did that until 2016 when I moved here full time.

What I appreciate about living in Savannah is the size of it—it is pedestrian versus car centric. I enjoy the proximity to the water, the landscape, the culture and the history that's here. It also has a European feel to me. Even though it is small, it has all the features you would find in a much larger city.

In 2016 you opened your own firm, Charles H Chewning Interiors in Savannah. Was that the plan? I really wanted to get back into design work



GRITTI PALACE, FRITZ VON DER SCHULENBERG, BEDROOM; ALEX MASTROSHUTTERSTOCK.COM (EXTERIOR); ARMSTRONG MANSION; THOMAS LOOF

Preserving History (CLOCKWISE ACROSS SPREAD FROM LEFT) A bedroom designed by Chuck Chewning in the award-winning Gritti Palace hotel. Entertaining and gardening accessories on display at Chewning's Savannah shop. The iconic Gritti Palace in Venice, Italy. The exterior of the Armstrong-Kessler Mansion. Chewning relaxes in the courtyard of his Savannah shop.



full time. I was still consulting for Rubelli and doing international projects with no intention of working in Savannah, but my good friends who owned The Grey restaurant in Savannah asked me to do their interiors. That's how my first project here happened. Then Richard Kessler [Chairman and CEO of the Kessler Collection, hospitality group] approached me about designing his own residence, the Armstrong Mansion. He knew I understood hospitality, but also that I understood working at a very large scale, so that was a sort of perfect fit. I realized I needed to get serious about opening up a firm in Savannah, which is what I did.

How is designing for residential interiors different than commercial and hospitality? It's very different interacting with design clients versus dealing with commercial corporations. There is a personal and emotional component to doing residential that doesn't necessarily exist when you're doing hospitality. Hospitality is a for-profit project, so there's a whole different approach to it.

What are some of the challenges of designing historic homes? I personally have lived in historic houses, so I understand how they should function for a modern lifestyle. We make sure all the essential core elements are modernized, which includes the kitchen, the bathrooms and the laundry—the functional areas of the house. The rest of it can take on a historic context, whether its actually really historical, or it's a new build to look historic. There's a real balance to that.

The floor plan of a historic house is typically divided up into individual rooms with distinct purposes, whereas modern living typically calls for a more open kitchen, dining and family room. It's interesting to take that concept into a historic house and see how it can flow and function and work. Sometimes we will open the space if it's not impacting any existing historic elements. Other times we might just rethink the use

of rooms. You have to be more creative and more flexible with historic homes.

What are you working on now? I have a mix of projects. We have several local residential projects, one at the Ford Field & River Club in Richmond Hill, GA, and another in downtown Savannah that is a new build but built to look historic. We are finishing up work on the Georgia State Capitol building, a restoration and redo of the Speaker of the House suites and offices. We are also doing an apartment in Paris in a historic building, and I've done some additional work on the Gritti, so I've stayed connected with that project.

In addition to your design company, you also have a shop, Courtyard by Chuck Chewning Interiors, in downtown Savannah. Why did you decide to add retail to your resume? I saw a need for outdoor furnishings and accessories. We live so much of our lives outdoors and our homes are oriented toward that indoor/outdoor living. It hit me that I needed to do a retail store that focused on that. We just celebrated our one-year anniversary. We are actually looking at other markets where we can expand the same concept—that's something we're considering for the future.

How would you define your aesthetic? A lot of my work has been about mixing historic and modern and also cultural mixing, so there are creative layers to the interiors. I like to work with a client to incorporate their personal things—pieces of furniture from family, children's artwork or things they have collected in their travels. I make sure those things find a place in the home, so the home takes on a personal identity and really reflects the people that are living there. I always tell the client, you're very much part of this story and the process of the story. At the end of the day, you are going to live here, not me. You need to be a part of this. chuckchewning.com.

—Mary Fitzgerald