

EXPAT LIVING

Soho Serenity

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Stories & Styles

PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL PERINI

Everything in SUSANNA VALERIO's Mid-Levels apartment tells a story – and it's a tale with travel at its heart, from her home country of Italy, to New York, Brazil, Egypt and Asia.

Tell us about your expat "trail"; where are you from and where have you been?

My nomadic life began at 21 when I went to New York to work for an art gallery; it was an exciting opportunity, and a stint of three months became three years. After returning to Rome, I met my husband, and we were soon posted to Rio de Janeiro with his company ENI (Italy's largest energy company); my two children were born there, and we had a wonderful life by the sea. I was designing knitwear at the time, manufacturing it in Tuscany and exporting it to the US. This made it possible for me to travel back and forth to Rome, where we still have our family home.

After seven years in Rio, we moved to Cairo, where I had the most exciting eight years of my life, riding my horses with the backdrop of the pyramids, exploring exotic markets and working with local artisans. The people made us feel so welcome.

With all of this travel, I kept my roots in Rome. Rome is undeniably one of the most beautiful cities in the world, elegant and rich in history like no other. I always look forward to seeing my old friends there, and I love visiting the country's diverse locations.

How did you feel when you moved here?

I have to admit that Hong Kong totally changed me. Brazil and Egypt were decadent, flamboyant and chaotically passionate and hectic places – life there was more about the joie de vivre than business. The contrast with Hong Kong couldn't be starker, but it was this change that gave me the motivation to start building my career.

The only thing I knew how to do well, and which came naturally to me, was designing homeware and styling houses, so that was it. I started to work for Joyce Ma taking care of the Home and Lifestyle department at JOYCE, and after four years I moved to Lane Crawford where I spent over 12 years designing and bringing to life new products and collections as well as buying and sourcing upcoming brands from every corner of the globe; I loved it!





Have you renovated or made any changes?

The apartment was in a state of disrepair and falling apart when I bought it, so I set about renovating the whole thing with the resources I had at the time. Today, I would do a few things differently, however there are a few features that still stand out for me, such as my solid-wood bookshelf that divides the living room and the TV room and which I designed myself. In the hallway is an archway designed by my late mother; it connects two walls that aren't in a traditional straight alignment but instead diagonal, creating a beautiful twisted effect.

Do you have a particular home décor style?

I don't have a particular style; the spaces I decorate tell me their story, and I work around that. My flat in Hong Kong is totally different from my home in Rome – it's bohemian and eclectic, with pieces from my travels and buying trips in Asia over the past 30 years. Over this time, I went through many different phases – so, some aspects come from indulging and having fun with vibrant colours; others are more traditional styles specific to different places or cultures.



Tell us a bit about SV CASA.

There are two key parts of the business: hospitality accessories and styling, and our retail line, SV CASA. To keep it simple, everything is branded SV CASA.

We started over a decade ago designing products for luxury hotels, mainly for the F&B and spas, but over time we moved into our own manufacturing and acquired our own factories, further expanding the business into hotel guestrooms and public area accessories. To date, we have completed over 320 projects including some of the world's most iconic properties, from the Rosewood in Hong Kong to the Four Seasons in Florence, Park Hyatt Beijing, Peninsula in Tokyo and so on. We have exciting projects in production, too, including the Regent Hong Kong, Peninsula London and more.

SV CASA was born when guests who stayed in hotels that had our accessories started to contact us wanting to buy our products, so we decided to launch our own luxury retail line, which now sells internationally.

The most recent development has been the rollout of major collaborations with celebrity designers Kelly Hoppen, Martyn Lawrance Bullard and, coming up, Yabu Pushelberg.

Where's your home in Hong Kong? When did you move there and what attracted you to it?

When my family arrived in Hong Kong, we lived in Estoril Court, Mid-Levels, but when my husband moved back to Rome, I decided to stay to continue my business and found the perfect home in Western Mid-Levels where I still live today.

It was love at first sight – a building old enough not to be impersonal yet still retaining some Hong Kong character. What I loved most was the double rooftop with a guesthouse; it makes me feel like I'm on holiday, even in the middle of Hong Kong. I spend a lot of time on my rooftop, reading, designing and, weather permitting, sunbathing.

What's notable about the location?

I live on Lyttleton Road, which is a wonderful spot in Mid-Levels. Most of the buildings are low-rises and this gives it a very neighbourly feel. Within a few minutes' walk, you're either in the hustle and bustle of the city or on the Morning Trail amidst thick trees and lush green canopies, or on the Pik Shan Trail with its hidden waterfalls. I don't know many places where you can find such contrast in such a short distance.

What are some of the key features of the home?

There are a few things I especially love about this apartment but the one I love the most is the roof, where I have the main rooftop divided by a guesthouse in the middle with sliding glass panels that can completely open and act as a living room and bar when I have dinner parties. Interestingly, there is also a second roof on top, above the guesthouse.

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 ”



My apartment is like a photo album of snapshots of my time in Asia, with small hints of my life in Egypt and Europe – everything tells a story.

My style in Rome is completely different. It's a classical and traditional Italian approach with family antiques and collections. In many ways, Hong Kong reflects my true character and personality while my home in Rome reflects my heritage and roots.

What are a few things you like to do in Hong Kong when you're not working?

I love the sun, so if I'm not on my roof enjoying it, I'll be at one of Hong Kong's many beaches with a good book! I also love to throw dinner parties and create whimsical tablescapes to match new recipes or a theme that I create for the evening.



Where's the first place you'd like to go for leisure travel when borders are fully open, and why?

The idea of quarantine upon arrival in Hong Kong deterred me from travelling for a long time. But there came a time when enough was enough, and last summer I took the plunge – when quarantine was still at its peak of three weeks – and travelled to Rome. From there, I went to Marrakech, Paris and London. Marrakech is one of my favourite places, still full of artisans and novelties, little stores where you can lose yourself in a wondering daydream. It's a place where you can see your ideas transformed to reality in a few hours by artisans, which is what I really love; above all, it's about searching for new ideas, products and designs that make this type of creativity food for the soul.

My next trip will be to Puglia in Southern Italy with my family, and then Tuscany.



Susanna's Recommendations

“When it comes to shopping, I've always loved markets of all sorts, from the flower market to textiles and collectables in Sham Shui Po, and everything in between. I'm not one for shopping malls and home-related products from a store. Maybe it's because I have been in the industry for so long but for me the three best sources of homeware are from a market; from a trade show such as Maison & Objet in Paris, where I can discover new trends and designs; or, if I really want something, I will design and manufacture it myself.”