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ALUMNAE  
QUARTERLY

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# Designed to impress



→ Hotel architect Tobin Schermerhorn '80 calls on distinctive local culture and a sense



By Jennifer Maddox Sergent '91

"New Orleans is a florid kind of place, flowery and Gothic," designer and architect Toby Schermerhorn '80 says, describing her inspiration for a French Quarter hotel where the fitness center is covered in wallpaper with black-velvet skulls and guest rooms feature hot-pink chandelier silhouettes over the beds.

The chandeliers, in fact, are stickers placed above headboards that are a trompe l'oeil wall covering of tufted fabric.

Local culture sets the tone for this and other hotels that Schermerhorn and her husband, Rob Laschever, design for the Marriott Renaissance chain. The couple—both architects—lives and works in a repurposed cow barn set in the pastureland of rural Frederick, Maryland. Under the rubric of their aptly named company, Cauhaus Design, Schermerhorn and Laschever create dramatic and distinctive hotel interiors—from lobby to ballroom to guest room—around the world.

In Cincinnati, Schermerhorn is intent on preserving the historic accents of an old bank building—such as the hammered-brass elevator doors and the soaring, vaulted ceilings of the bank lobby—for a future hotel. In the Dominican Republic, she's redesigning the suites and club lounge of the Jaragua Hotel, where the region's top jazz singers performed in the hotel's 1950s heyday, when prominent guests included Fidel Castro. "We're going to take the whole building back to a 1950s art moderne style—with a tropical twist," she says. In Canada, mean-

while, a new hotel connected to the Edmonton, Alberta, airport will adopt the airport's supermodern style, with concrete floors, stainless-steel columns and "lots of white leather." Think Le Corbusier meets the Jetsons, Schermerhorn says. She'll also riff on the local wilderness and hunting culture, with resin-sculpted moose and deer heads on the walls.

Schermerhorn, who earned a graduate degree in interior design at UMass Amherst and later got licensed as an architect, describes her hotel-design work as more Broadway than *House Beautiful*. "If [the guest rooms] looked like everyone's house, no one would want to go there," she says. "We want them to be inspirational; we try to make the best theater possible."

Schermerhorn is meticulous about cataloging her design inspirations. She keeps carefully indexed image files of furniture, objects, patterns and architectural details. Likewise, her studio has floor-to-ceiling shelves holding boxes and drawers of fabric samples, divided by manufacturer, color, texture and pattern. "Everything gets dated and labeled by hand," she says. Upstairs, under the soaring rafters of the former barn, Laschever stores his collection of more than 600 vintage chairs—another source of inspiration.

Hotel design is high-stakes work, Schermerhorn notes. One bad purchase—say, the wrong fabric for guest-room draperies—can mean a 10,000-yard mistake. She also has to design on an enormous scale. At the Renaissance Concourse Atlanta Airport Hotel, for instance, she needed hallway wall coverings that could be seen 12 floors up from the lobby. The stacked floors with wrought-iron balconies reminded her of a library, so she took a sepia image of vintage law books and enlarged it so each book was 9-feet tall. For the lobby seating in Edmon-

## SMITH BIO

**Major:** Art

**House:** Lamont

**Influential professor:** Theatre professor Kiki Smith. "She made costume design really fascinating, relating it back to history and politics. I spent every waking hour in the costume shop."

ton, Schermerhorn specified white leather in "tall, zoomy shapes" that adults can sit in and kids can climb on. "The pieces remind me of a jungle gym," she says.

Hotel brands demand a redo at least every five years, so Schermerhorn and Laschever can afford to be cutting-edge in their designs. "I'm always trying to figure out what's the next cool thing," she says. Currently, she's raving about the pattern and product designs coming out of Spain and Japan. "I see a lot more modernism, even within traditional buildings," she says. "There's a lot less fussiness in fabrics, in drapery, in trims and in fringes." Juxtaposing "weird colors," such as gray and vivid lime green, is big, too, she says.

Schermerhorn partly credits her calling—especially the "wow" factor she tries to inject at each hotel—to Smith, where she studied art history along with costume and lighting design. "I think my theater background at Smith is catching up to me," she says. And her daughter, Nicole Laschever '15, who is studying graphic and set design, is on a similar track. "She's sort of terrified that she likes the things we like!" Schermerhorn says.

*Jennifer Maddox Sergent '91, a frequent SAQ contributor, writes about design for her blog, DC by Design. [dcbydesignblog.com](http://dcbydesignblog.com)*

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