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Rowley's career includes an ending by design

Posted by Jeff Higley at 12:00 AM

Cheryl Rowley has spent her career making things comfortable for hotel guests. Now she's in a position to take care of herself and her family. Long known as a hotel designer who had a big role in making boutique hotels available to the common traveler, Rowley has closed up shop at her Beverly Hills office and is moving to Vancouver Island, British Columbia. That's where she'll get some quality time with husband Don Enright, a television and movie producer and writer who spent the last half decade commuting from the island to Tinseltown. A daughter also lives on the island.

Rowley, a Southern California native, looks back on her 30-plus years in hotel design with fondness—but she's eager to chill for a little while after spending so many years globetrotting while designing the interiors of some of the world's classiest hotels. The portfolio roster includes a number of Four Seasons properties scattered around the world, Jumby Bay in the British West Indies, the Ritz-Carlton and Mandarin Oriental in San Francisco and the Sofitel Los Angeles. Also on the roster are more than 20 properties for Kimpton Hotels & Restaurant Group, including the iconic Hotel Monaco in Washington, D.C., which is in a 200-year-old building that formerly housed the national post office. Taking a break from packing more than 200 boxes in her L.A.-area home, Rowley said what she'll miss most is all of her colleagues in the office. At one time, the office housed more than 40 employees. That number was at 10 when the doors finally closed last month. "It's bittersweet," she said. "It was a long time coming. I will miss my friends. I'll definitely miss my staff members. That choked me up more than

anything.” A desire to spend time with her husband and the realization that life doesn’t last forever drove Rowley’s decision to call it quits while in the prime of her career. The recent deaths of two close friends made the decision easier, she said.

“The time was right,” Rowley said. “We rode the worst of the recession, and we were turning away work the last couple of years.

“A vibrant, wonderful couple we knew well passed away and it really shook me up,” she said. “It made me re-evaluate what I was doing.”

While she plans to step away from the hotel industry, Rowley isn’t leaving the design world behind. She said she’ll be doing something focused on design—starting with her home and garden on Vancouver Island.

“I’m a designer—it’s definitely part of me,” she said. “I need to step back, take stock, breathe, walk and be with my family for awhile.

“I’ve been at this since I was 19-and-half years old, and it’s very odd to wake up and not be working, to go to brunch and say, ‘Hmmm, there’s a real world out here!’”

But Rowley hasn’t rule out consulting or collaborating with design and architect firms.

‘Boutique’ from the start

Rowley began her career under the tutelage of noted designer James Northcutt, with whom she developed an eye for smaller, intimate projects.

“They were boutique hotels before we knew the word ‘boutique,’” Rowley said. “At the time that was really unique.”

She said the boutique hotel movement was a counter to big brands that weren’t delivering a sense of place to visitors.

“This whole change of creating hotel experiences that were about the sense of place ... that’s what we were about,” she said. “Someone wants to go to Indonesia and know they are they not in New York.

That wasn’t common then.

“The introduction of boutique hotels to the broader public has introduced that public to design on a much broader scale.”

She added that there’s not one specific thing that states what makes a good design.

“We did projects across the spectrum, but generally, they were always comfortable, always had a certain amount of wit and humor, had something a little unexpected and

something youthful,” she said. “Color choices and a mix of elements—our approach was to be a little more transitional and contemporary.”

A large palette to use

She never considered her designs to be edgy. Instead, the use of color and patterns became her calling card.

“Some of my favorites were some of the early work that I did and the one I’m currently working on,” Rowley said, adding she is particularly eager to see the Four Seasons St. Petersburg (Russia) when it opens later this year.

She doesn’t see any huge trends developing in the hotel-design space.

“Boutique hotels will continue to prosper,” she said. “Big brands have gotten the message that people want to understand where they are and have unique experiences.

“A big, grand lobby is a thing of the past. A lobby living room where people gather has really permeated the industry and will continue.”

She said the sense of place will become more dramatic as new markets for hotels, including Latin America and China, become more developed.

Rowley’s devotion to developing a sense of place is her legacy to the industry. Recognizing an opportunity to enjoy her own sense of place while she’s still able to is her legacy to herself. Hopefully we’re all that fortunate.



"Still under construction, this neo-classic 19th century palace—Four Seasons’ first Russian hotel—is sure to be the premier accommodation in St. Petersburg. A highly complex four-year historic restoration involved a full roster of international consultants and stakeholders—including the Russian government—and the completed project will be a true testament to the dedication of the entire project team." -Cheryl Rowley



"Working in another fabulous resort destination with Rosewood afforded us the opportunity to take risks with the boundaries of bathroom design, this time literally pushing the bathing experience outdoors into a private garden. Our success with Rosewood was found in the creation of unique guest experiences, and what could be better than soaking in a hot tub on a remote island under the stars?" -Cheryl Rowley

"A sense of whimsy and layered detailing captures the essence of the Hotel Monaco brand. This, the first Hotel Monaco, laid the groundwork for seven additional Hotel Monacos that we completed for Kimpton. I will never forget the opening night when Bill Kimpton swept me off my feet and twirled me around in delight. It was a great night." -Cheryl Rowley



"The open-aired Library Lounge—a favorite gathering spot for morning coffee—featured the brilliant work of Zen, Rosewood's very own floral department. It was great fun to comb the property for coconut bark, breadfruit and anthurium flowers for a photo shoot highlighting the property's casual elegance and sense of place. Lessons learned on this very early project stayed with me throughout my career." -Cheryl Rowley