

Alexandra Mason and Lilli Shirin-Mason

Interior designer and director of Studio AEM Alexandra loves imparting knowledge of her craft to design-savvy daughter, Lilli. Here, they share their creative journeys.

PHOTOGRAPHY *Anson Smart*

Did your childhood have an impact on your future life and career? **Alexandra:** We moved around a lot when I was a child. By the time I was 11, I had lived in 10 different towns and countries. The nomadic nature of my childhood played a huge role in my choosing a career in interior design. Since our homes changed regularly, I looked for ways in which to create familiarity and meaning. **Lilli:** I was exposed to people from diverse cultures and backgrounds when I was growing up, which ignited my curiosity with the world. It also showed me the impact a person's surroundings can have on them.

How does your average workday unfold? **A:** Juggling urgent trade and client requests, site or showroom visits, meetings, sourcing, and putting presentations together or designing. When you have several jobs on the go, everything seems to go right or wrong at the same time! **L:** I am in the middle of a Bachelor of Design at the University of NSW, so my days swing between studying, working in my retail fashion job and helping Mum in her design studio.

What do you love about your work? **A:** I love the variety – no two projects are the same. **L:** I love learning design tips from Mum and being able to put what I'm learning at uni into practice. I especially enjoy helping Mum with her Instagram account, which is where I can really share my ideas.

The biggest challenge of your career? **A:** When I was starting out, I was a young mum studying interior design and trying to forge a career in a highly competitive industry. It's quite the juggle!

A particular achievement you are most happy with to date? **A:** Launching Studio AEM two years ago was a massive achievement. I spend a lot of hours dedicated to my craft but the rewards are worth the hard work.

Your dream project? **A:** A Parisian apartment blending a fusion of contemporary and traditional heritage features.

Your strategies for achieving good work-life balance? **A:** That's the million-dollar question! Occasionally there is balance but work wins about 90 per cent of the time. I have plans to expand our office, take on more people and share the workload. **L:** I struggle with balancing life and work, but I find writing to-do lists beneficial.

"The nomadic nature of my childhood has meant I am always looking for ways to create familiarity and meaning in my surroundings." Alexandra

What nourishes your creativity? **A:** Nature. I love going horse riding – it does wonders for my creativity as well as my mental health. I also spend a lot of time in the car and I use this time to listen to design-focused podcasts. The best thing to come out of Covid for me is that Lilli's lectures moved online so I can listen in. **L:** I enjoy painting – it allows me to really express myself.

What's on your reading list? **A:** *The Girl From Berlin* by Ronald H. Balson. Also *Chocolat* by Joanne Harris – a favourite that I re-read regularly. **L:** *Jasper Jones* by Craig Silvey.

Who are the creatives you admire? **A:** Belgian architects Vincent Van Duysen and Benoit Viaene. French designer Pierre Yovanovitch for his architecture and furniture. The work of [US interior designer and fashionista] Iris Apfel both inspires me and brings me joy. French architect and decorator Felix Milleroy. Yoon Young Hur for ceramics. Danish landscape architects Koster & Beijer, who use a lot of grasses in their whimsical designs. My favourite Australian artists include Bronte Leighton-Dore, Matilda Julian and Whitney Spicer.

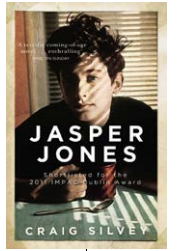
L: The late couturier Azzedine Alaïa, who aimed to empower women through fashion. He said "My greatest compliment is [a woman] looking at themselves and saying: 'I feel free'." I also adore Sydney artist Lucinda Jones. Her block-colour female figures represent both feminine strength and vulnerability.

Favourite design pieces? **A:** The Hans Wegner 'Peacock' chair would be at the top of my list. For lighting, I can't go past a Louis Poulsen 'PH' Series pendant light, and my favourite floor lamp is the Roattino by Eileen Gray for ClassiCon. **L:** The Wassily chair by Marcel Breuer – it's an iconic piece I first discovered when I was studying art in high school.

What is your idea of true luxury? **A:** Sailing around the Greek Islands, eating fresh food and drinking white wine. Also wandering the streets of Spain, immersing myself in the design, having siestas then dancing the night away.

A travel destination that has inspired your work? **A:** Paris. **L:** Israel. It's home to half of my family and has always influenced my art and design. The beautiful culture and people are something I've always been proud of and wanted to share with others. **H&G Studio AEM; studioaem.com.au.**

OPPOSITE Lilli (left) and Alexandra at the Harbour View house, a recently completed Studio AEM project. Artwork by Kerrie Oliver, Curatorial+Co. & Tradition 'Shuffle' side table, Cult Design. Skyline modular sofa and Giorgetti 'Gradient Reflex' rug, both Space.



ALEXANDRA AND LILLI'S FAVOURITE THINGS

From top *Jasper Jones* book by Craig Silvey, \$24, Allen & Unwin. Louis Poulsen 'PH5' pendant light, from \$1870, Cult Design. *Life's a Beach* artwork by Whitney Spicer, \$3200. PP550 Peacock chair by Hans Wegner, from \$18,750, Cult Design.

For Where to Buy, see page 190.