

Expat Lives

Coloured by every culture



Name: Diego Gronda

Age: 40

Occupation: Managing and creative director of Rockwell Group Europe

Born in: Buenos Aires

Now living in: Madrid

Has also lived in: New York

I grew up in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in a strongly rooted Italian family. My grandparents were Italians from Piedmont who emigrated to Buenos Aires after the first world war. I was educated at St Andrew's Scots School, one of Argentina's oldest bilingual schools. All my teachers were Scottish and even today I know more about English history than Argentine history. We played rugby and cricket and bagpipes were played at weekend events. For 18 years I was introduced to the world through a British lens. I even left school with a Scottish accent, although this soon disappeared in New York.

When the Falklands war broke out in 1982 it was no easy task wearing a Scottish flag on our uniform. Argentina is a country of deep contrasts and contradictions. Being perceived as an enemy in my own country was something too contradictory for me to understand at that time.

Seeing a Frank Lloyd Wright exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York inspired me to become an architect. Six years later I graduated with honours at the University of Buenos Aires, although I'd already started working as a designer, having set up a design firm when I was 21. I got a lucky break with my first international commission, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) headquarters – part of the World Bank – and work flooded

in following its success. After a series of important projects, however, I felt I was too young for corporate life so I moved to New York for a fresh start.

I arrived in the Big Apple intending to combine a masters in architecture with social studies at the New School. I soon sensed that my interests were veering towards architecture's social aspects – the interaction between people and their physical environment. Studying in an American school made me realise that my entire education had been academically and classically European. My ethos was focused on solving problems rather than questioning them. American culture introduced me to the “why” instead of the “how”.

After graduating I joined an architectural and interior design firm based in New York and was soon designing and building projects in places as diverse as Beirut, Muscat, Mumbai, Bangkok, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Manila and Jakarta. I spent a lot of time in Beirut and developed some enduring friendships. Working on the reconstruction of the Phoenicia hotel, one of the gems of Lebanese architecture and a centre of Beirut's social life, I began to feel “Lebanese” myself. I soon realised that similar feelings emerged with every single culture I experienced. In a 10-day time-frame I would find myself immersed in Christian Anglo-Saxon culture in Germany, Muslim-Christian culture in Lebanon, totally Muslim culture in the UAE and Oman, cosmopolitan Buddhism in Bangkok, Chinese Taiwanese in Taipei, buzzing Buddhism in Tokyo and new age culture in Los Angeles.

This cultural and religious cross-pollination started to affect my designs and personal relationships. It didn't happen in a “fusion cuisine” kind of way where flavours lose their provenance. Each new design was deeply rooted in the specific culture. My new challenge was to create emotional links between the local culture and the global community. In a deeply homogenised world that's so consumed by global brands you sometimes wonder which country you are visiting, the search for local provenance was an obvious choice.

When I joined the architect David Rockwell at the Rockwell Group, with a mandate to develop his company's international business, I continued to develop my interest in engaging people at an emotional level through design. Our goal is to create spaces and objects that connect with people – something we've agreed never to compromise. This journey of exploration



Energy 'Madrid is a lively city that is in constant transformation'

has always gone beyond beauty and aesthetics because beautiful objects may, or may not, engage a viewer.

While living in New York I met my wife, Elena, a Spaniard, who was working for JP Morgan Chase and had just moved to London before we started dating. I was travelling to Europe and the Middle East a lot at that time so we used to spend each weekend in a different city. After a year we decided to reduce the mileage involved and Elena moved back to New York.

We married and had twins – a boy and a girl who are now four – and decided to move to Madrid, where Elena runs the Garrigues Foundation and is involved in applied legal research. Moving to Europe gave me the opportunity to set up Rockwell Group Europe. I work with an eclectic group of locals and expat designers from around the world, combining American pragmatism and systematic thought with European elegance and customs.

Nor is working in Mumbai, Croatia, Costa Rica or Buenos Aires a hurdle. It's a blessing. Working in India, for example, is an exercise in digging out and celebrating its diversity. It's not uncommon for clients, or even fellow designers, to suggest the no-brainer approach of importing a design or product from the west. But Indians are more inclined to develop their roots than follow a foreign approach.

Having spent three years in Spain, I am slowly understanding Spanish culture and its trademark joie de vivre. Madrid is a lively city that is in constant transformation and I find this energy tremendously influential. We work New York-style – more than 80 per cent of business is conducted in English – but enjoy Madrid's quality of life.

Spain lives at a different speed from other places. In Madrid I've learned to have lunch at a restaurant each day. It won't take more than 40 minutes but it's a big improvement on my days in New York, when I'd eat with my left hand while checking mail with my right hand.

Ibn Battuta, a legendary Arab poet and traveller who journeyed between Persia and Andalusia in the 14th century, summarised the feelings of modern globe-trotters perfectly. He said: “The more I travel, I feel less at home at my place and more at home everywhere else.” How little we have changed.

Nicole Swengley