

How Venus Williams's V Starr Is Reinventing the Wheel in Interior Design

The tennis titan's successful South Florida-based interior design studio, V Starr, in many ways reflects her career on the court

By **Vaishnavi Nayel Talawadekar**

The first time interior designer Sonya Haffey met Venus Williams, she didn't recognise her right away. "Maybe it was because she was sitting down, but I remember thinking she looked familiar," says Haffey, now principal at the Williams-owned, South Florida-based interior design studio V Starr, who recalls the faux pas as being equal parts amusing and embarrassing. After all, who would have imagined that Venus Williams, winner of seven Grand Slam titles, five Wimbledon championships and four Olympic gold medals, someone regarded as one of the greatest tennis players in history, would be hiring her as a lead designer? Venus Williams, that's who.

Few people anticipated that Williams's second career would be in design. But Williams always knew. "Growing up, I always had a love for the arts. Although my parents started me in tennis, it was important to me to have a creative outlet," she avers. After evaluating an array of potential artistic pursuits, she elected to pursue design, because it felt inherently similar to tennis: the conditions were uncertain, the solutions constantly evolving, the expectations continually adjusted. In 2002, she founded V Starr, a portmanteau of her name, Venus Ebony Starr Williams.

Much has changed since the company's birth twenty-one years ago, although its motivation to remain boutique, make a big impact, maintain close relationships with clients and partners alike, are all true to the original vision, as is the team, a group of youthful, diverse and well-travelled individuals whose collective experience spans the globe. Perhaps this is why the company isn't defined by a particular style or theme or period. Each project is assessed individually, uniquely, and no two are alike, just as no two members are.

Haffey is a fascinating case in point, hailing from a family steeped in design. "My grandmother designed her own home, including her own furniture, my aunt lived in modern interiors; my father has a passion for the arts and took me, as young as five, to museums, galleries and shows, and my mother was hands-on with any construction we did on our home," recalls Haffey, who studied design at Florida State University and subsequently at university stints across London, Paris, Milan and Glasgow. She began her design career in Miami, at a small commercial and residential firm owned by actor Andy Garcia's sister. Two years later, she

was licensed, and soon after began her own company, a venture she sold off in 2007 to take a year-long sabbatical. Then, she was introduced to Venus Williams.

Similarly sui generis is the company's design director Holly Nixon. Born in a small farm village in the UK, she moved to Australia at 15, and began travelling the world soon after her eighteenth birthday. "It ignited my love of learning about different cultures and traditions and how that can play into design and architecture. I feel most inspired when I'm able to take a trip somewhere," notes Nixon. But her sentiments as a student were entirely the opposite. "After studying interior design, I was burnt out and unsure whether it was the industry for me. I spent a few years working a bunch of different jobs and travelling around Southeast Asia and America. I picked up a temporary job to fill a few months between travel plans, and it happened to be in one of Australia's best architecture and design firms. I started in a temporary role on the reception, and once they realised my design skills and background, they very quickly pulled me into the design team on a permanent basis," she shares. Her next goal was a bid to gain international work experience, preferably in America. In 2012, in the middle of the global financial crisis, she landed a job in Las Vegas, and spent six years there working on a gamut of projects on the strip, across the country, and in Asia. She married, got her green card, and through a good friend in the industry, was put in touch with Haffey. Moving with her husband to Florida, as V Starr's design director, was next on the cards.

The company's clientele is unique in that developers are its largest segment, with hospitality owners a close second. "Our clients look for great ideas, a storyline, and fantastic design at an affordable cost with documentation that you can build from," reflects Haffey. Nixon adds that clients are viewed as partners: "Our clients' goals are our goals and we pride ourselves on the relationships we build." Her particular brand of design, firm in the belief that spaces should invoke emotions and feelings, holds a mirror to the firm's. "We don't design to a style. We love researching the project, the client, the demographics, the locality and the history, and the story starts to tell itself from there." As it did in the case of the spa at PGA National Resort in Florida, originally constructed in 1981 and which the firm was tasked with refreshing. The team took cues from the coastline, echoing the golden sunlight and soft, sandy textures with champagne gold ceilings and pristine white surfaces. Coral and soft pink tones, muted gold, washed woods, creamy shades of white, accented palm prints, a domed entry space and tiled floors inspired by pillowy white sand were amongst the other reigning hallmarks.

Haffey and Nixon draw inspiration from everywhere, from their peripatetic pasts, their present travels, from icons they look up to: Zaha Hadid, Antoni Guadi, Tadao Ando, Patricia Urquiola, Jaime Hayon, to name a few. Their combined signature is eclectic and happily unapologetic. In 2018, this was reflected in the design of the Tennis Club and the V Suite, the latter named in Williams's honour, at the Midtown Athletic Club in Chicago. The suites were conceived as a glamorous post-workout escape. The living room walls were darkened to soothe the heart rate, the bedroom was softened with luxurious white tones and blown glass pendant fixtures, and the bathroom, modelled like a spa, was outfitted with marble and mahogany walnut woods as a swish reimagination of a traditional locker room.

For Williams, the ever growing complexity and scale of these projects serves as reassurance of a career goal fulfilled. "I want to open the door for more people who have not been exposed to the industry and don't see design as a career path. Increasing the number of women and people of colour in interior design and development is top-of-mind for me as this is a very male-dominated industry. Once more people see this field as an opportunity, more doors will open," she observes of this second career, just as she had so many moons ago her first, as a young girl on the grass court.