



# Keeping Up with the Kemps

Interview & words Phadria Prendergast

*In an exclusive interview with founder and creative director of Firmdale Hotels and the Kit Kemp Design studios, Kit Kemp MBE, where she is also joined by her daughters Willow Kemp, who heads collaborations and interior designer Minnie Kemp, they reveal what has allowed Firmdale Hotels and the Kemp empire to withstand the test of time and how they give back.*

**K**it Kemp MBE is regarded as a respected authority in British art and craft. Having founded Firmdale Hotels; a collection of boutique hotels and restaurants across New York and London, alongside husband Tim Kemp, it wasn't any wonder. Its first property, the Dorset Square Hotel first opened its doors in London, in 1985. Now, almost four decades later, the Kemp empire, comprising an extensive portfolio of ten hotels, four publications and Kit's eponymous interior design studio, exhibiting a collection of lux, must-haves for your home which included bedding, wallpaper and furniture. Kit and husband Tim, work alongside two of their three daughters Willow and Minnie, giving them the opportunity to also carve names for themselves within the industry. There was no doubt about it; the Kemp family were creating a dynasty.

Minnie Kemp, the youngest of Kit's three daughters, had been working for the Kit Kemp design studio since 2012. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in graphic design, which she obtained from Leeds university and began her journey working for the family business looking after their smaller hotel properties and assisting with any necessary refurbishments. "With Number Sixteen in Knightsbridge, we would refurbish about seven or eight rooms a year. Then, I moved onto [the] Soho Hotel, refurbishing and designing." She received her first shot at designing from the ground up, when the family opened New York based hotel, The Whitby Hotel. "We did all the design and all of the architectural plans in London and then went to New York and did the install." She laughs as she recalls it being the same time as the Trump election, and how difficult it had been to get any of the furniture into the building without first being stopped.

Willow Kemp was the middle child and had been part of the Kit Kemp design studio team since 2012. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Architecture from Cambridge university, and a Masters in sculpture at an academy in Germany. Willow has taken the helm of all collaborations for the Kit Kemp brand, since joining the family business. "Within Firmdale Hotels, there are so many different things that need designing, and all those small details make the guest experience so much more unique and special."

If you hadn't known the trio were a mother and daughter combo, you could have easily mistaken them for sisters - and it had nothing to do with age or even looks. They genuinely enjoyed being in each other's company and

clearly had a lot of fun together. Their smiles and laughter was infectious, even through Zoom.

I wanted to know how the family business had remained innovative since its inception back in the 80s. "If you've got a healthy business, it never stands still. It always has to be growing in some way, aspect or form. Sometimes it can take you by surprise, [but] I think sometimes you've almost got to be frightened of your new projects. You've got to be able to not know exactly what's going to happen next," Kit responded. She was a self-taught interior designer, who in the beginning of her career often took on greenfield projects which meant there was no physical building, just the architectural design, but she would still deliver from start to finish. In short, Kit knew that growth had to be continuous and at every stage for both the business and every individual involved, in order to remain relevant. Willow and Kit also shared the same views. "It's about being out of your comfort zone, and through experimenting, you're always pushing forward."

For their most recent project, Kit, Willow and Minnie had commissioned artists, work and handicrafts from all around the world which included countries such as Czechoslovakia, India, South Africa and France. "I think the interesting thing is that artists who do art are often a named person, but someone who does craft is often very anonymous and it runs in families. Craft has always been a little sister to art, but now, suddenly it's finding itself and people are really starting to appreciate it. It's great to be at the front of this movement and then seeing the way that it's moving forward. Now, so many of these craftsmen and women that we have championed, are suddenly becoming very well known," Kit commented proudly.

I was interested to know whether a lot had changed in terms of how customers now viewed interior since the global lockdown, which saw many confined to their four walls. "Without a doubt," Kit exclaimed. "People have [now] spent a lot more time at home and they've been sitting on the sofa or they've had to find a workspace, which is private for them in their home. If it's a husband, a wife or the children, they all need to have that little internal space to call their own. So I think people have started looking at their surroundings much more. Many people have left cities - they've actually moved house, so that's another way of almost reinventing themselves." The award-winning designer whole-heartedly believes that a lot could be told about what you were thinking or feeling through your interior. "It's not rocket science, but it should never be underestimated," she finishes.

When most brick and mortar establishments temporarily shut their doors across the world, including the family's extensive portfolio of properties, the Kemps found another way to give back to their community through words, via the Kit Kemp online magazine they had launched a year prior. "We wanted to give people the opportunity to learn how to make





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a lampshade or to learn about what colours go well in a kitchen, and do step-by-step guides, as well as do's and don'ts [lists]," Minnie stated. "We suddenly realised that creativity at home was a huge thing," Kit adds.

The family also released their fourth book 'Design Secrets' earlier this year, also giving their customers the opportunity to obtain their very own signed copy. "It's been really well received because people don't want big designer names any more. They want to have interior that says something much more about them, and I think that Design Secrets just tapped into that," Kit finishes. During the lockdown, Minnie also spearheaded a project with charity, St. Cuthbert's Centre which is based in Earls Court, London, where the food is supplied to their soup kitchen by Refettorio Felix, founded by Chef Massimo Bottura. Last year, the Kemps hand stitched the St. Cuthbert's Centre's tablecloths, whilst this year saw them redesign the soup kitchen's green rooms. "We can go and serve lunch,

which is just minutes from the office," she commented with excitement.

Alongside the Kit Kemp online magazine, customers can now 'shop Kit Kemp', purchasing pieces they love with an added personal touch, which allows them to have an input on the designs and fabrics they choose.

The trio remain mindful that their collections continue to offer one-of-a-kind pieces that their customers can own forever. "I think that's what the pandemic has taught us; that you want more meaningful pieces that will last forever. Pieces that you can bring from home to home, and not things that you just buy and throw away, that aren't going to last," Minnie states. "We have our favourite artists and people that we love and then we ask them to paint and design lamps. Once you've got one, they're not replaceable - we're only just doing one of each! We're never going to be a mass production company," Kit finishes.

