

# Studio Astolfi

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## Dreams are made of this

Words: Patrícia Barnabé  
Photo: Joana Astolfi Courtesy

Architect, artist and storyteller, Joana Astolfi has begun breathing life into new spaces in Lisbon and is now a lifestyle trendsetter throughout the country.

An only child, she grew up creating stories in the fanciful world that is her head and spent hours on end watching people on the streets. Even today it is observation and instinct that feeds her overflowing creativity. She invented games and made her own toys with things she found lying around, to which she gave meaning, context and life. She was not even 10 and she kept them in small showcases: “Some little wooden houses that I made at my dad’s studio with the remains of his models. Then I would fill them with pencils, erasers, leaves and flowers I picked in the garden, or with something I took from a place we visited because it reminded me of special times.” Then she started thinking about the display: “How can I have this object near me in a beautiful way?” She continues to be dedicated to this practice, even in the plant-filled room where we are sitting, flooded with the immense light of Lisbon.

She followed in her father’s footsteps and studied architecture in Munich before debuting in London and Treviso. And it was in this Italian city near Venice that she was first noticed by Fabrica, Benetton’s young creative centre. When she returned to Portugal more than a decade ago, she moved to the centre of old Lisbon and knocked on the doors of the old shops in the Chiado and Baixa looking for special objects; or she rooted through the piles of junk at the Feira da Ladra, picking up bits and pieces of life stories. They said: “You only like rubbish,” she recalls, laughing. “Just wait and see what I do with this rubbish.” She created small niches in which to recount the narratives, giving a new life not only to the objects but also, later, to the nooks and crannies and spaces. The starting point is always “being passionate about that thing. To me the objects are alive, have energy, vibration, power and fascination. I carry some with me, then clutch them at certain times. I like that small thing you can hold in your hand. The object might even be “ill”, but I look at its potential and will often transform it, taking a bit away here, adding a bit there.

Today her “showcases” are architectural projects, interior designs, exhibition design, window displays and the “arty” interventions we come across in Lisbon. Some examples are the beautiful shop windows at Hermès, which she created a few years ago, and the interiors of shops such as Claus Porto, Pau Brasil and Labrador, which she has given “the sensation of being at home, with a lounge and a fireplace, lots of wood, warm colours, integrated furniture and built-in shelves” all created by her wonderful carpentry team. More recently she has decorated the vegan venue, Antigo Talho, “in organic materials, micro-cement and lots of plants,” and the new and modern André Ópticas shop in the Chiado. This season, Hermès asked her to dress their Portuguese and Spanish shop windows in the theme of the Human Odyssey, “on travel, from Ulysses and Greek mythology to the encounters and adventures since man first stood upright and began walking, even journeying to the stars,” she says.

Also iconic are her designs for José Avelaz’s restaurants, including Cantinho, which he opened in Cascais and Parque das Nações, Beco and the new Belcanto, which she describes as one of her best ever projects. “It’s pure poetry: velvet curtains seven metres high, low lights and fabric wallpaper. We designed the sofas and the benches with straw backs as well as the chef’s space, the Viúva Lamego [factory] made the utensils [in ceramic] and the ingredients used in the kitchen...” She also has the chef’s new projects to launch in 2021. Outside Lisbon, her cabinet of curiosities in the S. Lourenço do Barrocal hotel in Reguengos is well-known, and the “arty” experiments in large shopping centres, such as the food court at Strada Outlet in Odivelas, “an obsolete space that I transformed into a Scandinavian jungle, a labyrinthine greenhouse complete with benches and flower boxes we designed, and a large cage,” she says. And Galleria, an extension of the “upscale” Norteshopping, with its “five lounges, tea houses, kiosks and cafes.”

During the pandemic, she completed a big new project at the World of Wine’s new Fashion and Textile Museum that is soon to open in the heart of Porto: “We designed all the exhibitors for more than 1,000 items recounting the history of textiles in a space of more than 2,500 square metres: from the raw materials to large factories, while paying tribute to Portuguese designers.” And she has also created pieces of string art, or used piles of folded fabrics to create basic architectural objects, including arches and pillars made of fabric scraps. “We folded more than 1,000 metres of fabric to create sculptural structures. I like to go and look for things nobody does anything with.”

The projects don’t end there: a kitchen showroom in the Worten stores, “a space in space that is a world of experiences;” a community living project called Costa Terra, consisting of 200 houses that are going to be built by an American company in Melides, for which she will design the headquarters: “Casual, playful but with a very high-end feel.” And projects for individuals: a house in Lapa, Lisbon, where “we designed everything as *couture*, all integrated — every drawer and corner to house their travel and life memorabilia,” and a large villa in Estoril with a garden: “a very beautiful house, with high ceilings, full of history and small labyrinths”, she says. “We have to go very deep with the client when it’s about their homes. I have to be a bit of a detective, smelling the dust and researching while wearing gloves and overalls,” she says, laughing: we can’t stop her when she talks about her projects. We particularly like the *Árvore da Esperança* (tree of hope), a beautiful tribute to the victims of the wildfires that devastated Portugal, which she opened with the President of the Republic. “This is hard to put into words, but as an artist and a creative, I also have a duty to educate the eye, to open the door to a new way of seeing things.”

Joana Astolfi began working alone until she opened the Studio Astolfi in 2009, which now employs 17 people: a “family” that quite literally has its hands in the clay. They enter a space, “remove everything and create a new skin from the bottom up. My challenge is to give another direction to the story of that space, to take its memories and truth and try to understand what can continue and what can be given a new life: a tension between the old and the contemporary,” she says. “I’m not interested in the blank page. Starting from scratch is no fun.” And she always liked celebrating the beauty of errors and imperfections. Studio Astolfi’s motto is “Let’s make better mistakes tomorrow.” “The creative errors I commit in my work always open a door to something better. Even if only to tell me that’s not the way. Sometimes the mistake itself becomes the *ex libris* of the piece: it’s wonderful!” This is why she allows accidents to happen: they are part of the creative process.

She is now making her debut in art direction for advertising, having designed the set and decor for a L’Oreal advert. She was very excited. “I feel unstoppable in terms of energy. There are very dynamic times ahead after the pandemic,” she says. “Creative people don’t choose to be, they have a drive to do, and there’s going to be a lot of dust in the air and a very big refresh. This is the time to take big steps, to take risks, for people to follow their dreams: now more than ever. Because just now we feel our fragility and other ways of life that we had never before thought of.”