

BEYOND LUXURY LIVING

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# LIFESTYLE ASIA

THE  
MEANING OF  
HOME

WHERE THE  
STORY BEGINS  
NATHALIE KÜPPER HENARES,  
PIE ALVAREZ,  
DEREK RAMSAY,  
CECILE ZAMORA, AND  
CANDY DIZON

FAST-FORWARD FAMILY  
**JESSICA  
KIENLE  
MAXWELL &  
STEPHANIE  
KIENLE GONZALEZ**  
ON KEEPING UP WITH THE EVOLUTION  
OF FILIPINO DESIGN





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Sofa: LEO CONSTANTINO



# “HOME IS ABOUT FAMILY, FRIENDS THAT ARE FAMILY, AND LOTS OF LAUGHTER AND LOVE”

STEPHANIE KIENLE GONZALEZ AND JESSICA KIENLE MAXWELL grew up alongside their family's luxury furniture brand. But what they've come to learn over the years is that turning a house into a beautiful home goes beyond plush design—it's all about the memories.

Text: BAM V. ABELLON Photos: MARK NICDAO





*Environ: Edge;*  
*Ox Maxwell:*  
*Pool lounge area: design by*  
**HINDY WEBER**  
*Ox Gonzalez:*  
*White ceramic side table:*  
*legs, bar stools:*  
*Jerusalem side:*  
*light: courtesy of*  
**HINDY WEBER**

*Philux: Cigar table;*  
*Philux: George;*  
*Chair, and table:*  
*For more, visit*  
**PHILUX**  
*Ox Gonzalez:*  
*Floral long-sleeve:*  
*courtesy of*  
**ZIMMERMAN**

**I**f the words “evolving style” were to come to life, sisters Stephanie Kienle Gonzalez and Jessica Kienle Maxwell would be their incarnation. A master of mixing classic with modern designs, their aesthetics manifest themselves in both their ventures and their family life.

Gonzalez’s current home routine, for instance, has been all about adapting to these challenging times, while staying true to her values. In teaching her daughters about what’s going on around them, she says, “I try to stay as honest and truthful as possible.” Their home, as in the case of many people during the pandemic, has turned into a vessel of learnings and discoveries.

“I feel that I learned as much about myself as a parent as I learned about my children during this time,” she says, speaking about her daughter Andrea and Arielle with husband Chris Razon Gonzalez. “I am very proud of how they have adjusted to our new reality because I see the independence it has fostered. I am also very thankful to have a strong support system: our family, our household staff, their teachers online. Parenting has been a team effort and I am grateful to those who have helped.”

Maxwell, who shares a newly-renovated home with husband Jesse and their two kids Luca and Layla, has changed her routine, too. Before the pandemic, home was a place where work-related thoughts were put aside. Since she works there now,

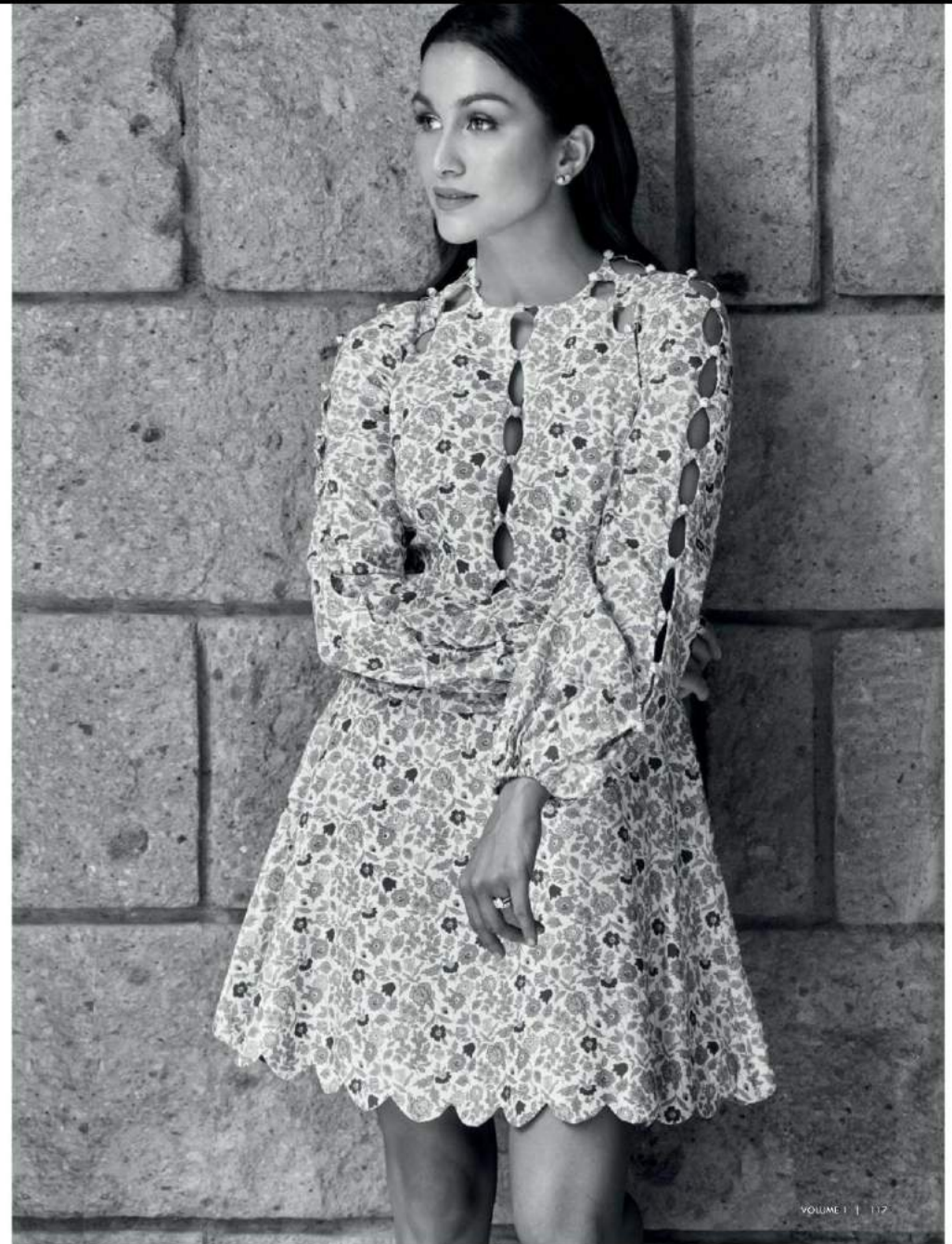
she tries to allocate a few hours of her day to simply stay in a room and go through her tasks. “To be one hundred percent productive, it is important to have a designated place to work in, a quiet space where you can stay focused without distraction,” she says.

*“I feel that I learned as much about myself as a parent as I learned about my children during this time”*

Adjusting to this new normal was especially hard for Maxwell, who had to give birth to Layla during the whole health calamity. “There were so many uncertainties, and that is what was worrisome,” she recalls. “It was definitely a scary time, but I trusted my doctor and I just had to accept the fact that I could not have full control of the situation. I had to have faith that everything will be okay.”

While the sisters have it together, Gonzalez says that this new situation can highlight the “little quirks and emotional moments.” But it has allowed them to see some things a little clearer: “our life’s path is all the more anchored in purpose.”

Purpose, too, is what has been driving luxury furniture brand Philux, a family business, to continue moving forward amidst changing times. Gonzalez is the brand’s chief operating officer while Maxwell is its vice president and head of design and merchandising.







#### DESTINED PATH

Philux, a portmanteau that combines “Philippine” and “luxury,” began with a purpose to promote Filipino craftsmanship. With only two carpenters working with them, Max Kienle and wife Zelda Aragon (Gonzalez and Maxwell’s parents), created the brand in 1980.

Although the sisters were groomed to take over the business one day, the young Gonzalez was uncertain about the path she wanted to take. And she was given the freedom to explore her options—the same freedom she wants to give her children. “While I would love for my daughters to be involved in the business one day, I would like for them to be given the choice to discover what their passions are and pursue them,” she says. “I would support whatever they feel strongly about.”


After graduating from Sarah Lawrence College in New York with a degree in economics (and after taking other courses in Paris and London), Gonzalez saw her future clearly. “I certainly wasn’t sure I was going to join the business,” Gonzalez remembers. “But I did so naturally, after my years of schooling abroad. My parents gave me the chance to participate and I was challenged by the opportunity.”

Maxwell, on the other hand, was already interested in design and interiors from an early age. She remembers her mom taking her and Gonzalez to showroom rounds. In those moments, she would watch in awe as her mom fixed the displays. She grew up admiring the likes of designers Muriel Brandolini, for her Asian and European influences; Victoria Hagan, for her classic, clean designs; Kelly Wearstler, for her bold aesthetic and sculptural furniture; and Nate Berlus, for his vintage touches.

After graduating from Parsons School of Design in NYC, and studying interior architecture in Paris, Maxwell pursued her passions. She shares Gonzalez’s perspective when it comes to her kids. “As much as I would love to see my children involved in Philux when they are older, at the end of the day it is completely up to them. And who knows what their interests will be or what they will end up doing. My parents have always said that they were proud of where we are taking the business and love seeing all the changes we are making. I imagine I would also feel very proud and excited to see where my children would take it, and see how Philux would evolve in their hands.”

On Maxwell  
Royal Blue dress  
inspired by  
CAROLINA  
HERRERA  
The jewelry  
courtesy of  
GURAV





*“We are soundboards for each other, for the good and the bad. We make sure to support each other when needed. We absolutely love doing creative and purposeful work together”*

*On Maria's  
Maroon  
overalls by  
Eric from  
HOUSE OF  
LAUREL*

*On Grace's  
Green wood  
print shorts  
by CMBO  
COLLECTIVE  
available at  
COMME ÇI*

*Green duo earrings  
available at  
CURAVI*



#### DYNAMIC DUO

Evolution is indeed a constant presence in Philux. When the brand started, a couple was at the helm, now it's the couple's daughters—same family, different dynamics. The energy and zest that the sisters share for the brand can be “tricky,” Gonzalez explains.

“It comes with the difficulty of not being able to separate business from pleasure. The great advantage, however, is that we are able to make firm, actionable decisions swiftly to effect meaningful change,” she says. “As a family, we often lead with our hearts and have a truthful exchange of ideas, which helps drive the company forward.” Ultimately, she says they aim to serve by focusing on self-growth and improvement, a value they want to see trickle down to their team members, and openly share with partners and clients.

Maxwell thinks she is just lucky to be brainstorming and creating ideas with her sister, which she says is a lot of fun. “Although we are both very different people, we are very much on the same wavelength,” she reveals. “We work well together as we respect each other's opinions and communicate well with each other.”

On the whole, Gonzalez says working with her sister has been like hanging out with a best friend. “It doesn't always feel like work,” she says. “We are soundboards for each other, for the good and the bad. We make sure to support each other when needed. We absolutely love doing creative and purposeful work together.”

*“We often lead with our hearts and have a truthful exchange of ideas, which helps drive the company forward”*

It is fortunate, then, that they are working side-by-side family during these past difficult months. For a relatively small business, the future can be faltering. “I was worried about our employees and their families,” Gonzalez reveals. “I was wondering whether our market would still be around after the strict lock down.”

#### STAYING STRONG

The four-decade-old company was forced to push forward with plans that were already in the final stages of completion—a blessing in disguise, perhaps. Instead of opening new physical showrooms, they are now focusing on accelerating the development of their online platform and concierge design service. “We had to make immediate, conscious, and tough decisions to navigate through the storm and ensure the wellbeing and sustainability of our brand, company, and team members,” Gonzalez says.

Even Maxwell's tanning studio, Spray, which opened only in December 2019, experienced setbacks during the pandemic. They had to close for half of 2020. “It will take time, but we believe the economy will bounce back,” she says. “Once it opens up, people will feel more comfortable to try new things again.”

*Drife Dasy Quins  
Aria Dasy Jefe,  
Maxwell Gonzalez,  
Maxwell Rajut,  
Haritha, Teresa Dasi  
at PHILUX*







Philux is standing through the test of time—and through an unprecedented global health crisis. What started as a brand that is known for their rattan pieces, is now one that not only portrays the Filipino culture, but also supports the Filipino artists. Their creations themselves tell their story: timeless, yet progressive.

***“My design sensibility transforms as I discover new artisans and artists that resonate with me”***

In their current collection, Gonzalez loves their Stockholm bed for its *sotihya detail*: “an elegant piece that speaks of modern Filipino.” She and her sister are also enamored with their newer, mod pieces, like the Alva dining table, a statement piece, with its scalloped base and solid stone top—Maxwell has one in her house.

“It is important that we create, develop, and manufacture as much as possible within our workshop,” Gonzalez reiterates. “All of our furniture pieces are crafted by Filipinos hands. We are continuously searching

for new local materials and techniques to further develop our designs and creativity.”

They are also in constant collaboration with fresh Filipino talents: “We always in the lookout of emerging artisans and artists because we believe in supporting small and local businesses, as well—especially in today’s challenging economic environment.”

They recently launched Philux Spaces, which is the brand’s design arm that allows clients to consult, collaborate, and create with their team. A design consultant can have a one-on-one discussion with a client on their furniture needs, or the Philux team can present a furniture layout or a digital moodboard for them. They can also execute an approved creative plan through a concierge and personalized service.

Gonzalez also shares that they are helping to design an international luxury brand showroom due to open midyear, where they intend to use and highlight Filipino elements.

On Gonzalez  
Sotihya detail  
photo by  
**CAROLINA  
HERRERA**  
Kula paper by  
Maxwell  
**BAGASAO**,  
available at  
**COMME CI**  
Brand consultant  
**CURAV**





*“All of our furniture pieces are crafted by Filipinos hands. We are continuously searching for new local materials and techniques to further develop our designs and creativity”*



#### A "NEW" HOME

Whenever someone asks Gonzalez about her style, she says she can never give a definite answer. She reckons it's because her style, like herself and their brand, keeps evolving. "My design sensibility transforms as I discover new artisans and artists that resonate with me," she says.

People love to categorize, Gonzalez says, and give labels to interior design. "While I understand the need for this, I have never felt obliged to adhere to a particular look," she says. "Eclectic is an overused word that describes a combination of styles that doesn't fit the norm, but it defines best how I enjoy mixing textures and elements from different time periods: a modern take to a traditional style and including natural elements."

While she admires and honors tradition, Gonzalez takes pleasure in giving design a little twist. "I enjoy creating a visual oxymoron, juxtaposing old and new, classic and contemporary, masculine and feminine, patina and polish," she shares. "The unexpected combination energizes and creates a unique and evocative space, always in touch with its surroundings."

And that's why, too, she loves decorating and witnessing these beautiful memories being made in the space she had created. Her own home shares the same ideology (While she and her husband both have a say in what furniture to buy or where to put certain pieces, she says, "Chris knows what to leave to me").

*"I appreciate spaces that combine pieces and elements from different design aesthetics"*

Gonzalez says home design is rarely stagnant, like memories: "It evolves, as your life does. Therefore, whatever regrets of mistakes you have made design-wise can be remediated." Her home now, for instance, is definitely different from what it was last year. It has, for her family, become a multidisciplinary space. "It's not just a place where we eat, entertain, sleep," she explains, "we now meditate, exercise, educate, and work there, too, among many other activities. It is all the more sacred to care for these little pockets of space within the home for our overall wellbeing."

Maxwell had experienced a more tremendous kind of change in her home life. Sometime in the middle of the pandemic, she and her husband started thinking about moving out of their apartment and moving in to a house. While the former was practical, they've always dreamt of having their own outdoor space.

One day, they were driving around to see what kind of houses were available, when they came across one that, as Maxwell would put it, "not exactly the house that we would have designed, but it is the perfect house for us right now."

*Dr. Maxwell  
Wong goes  
back to her first  
HOUSE OF  
LAUREL*







The house is an old one, Maxwell says, "but it has great bones." Naturally, they did the decorating themselves, and luckily, the couple have similar tastes. Like Gonzalez, Maxwell doesn't have a particular design style. "I appreciate spaces that combine pieces and elements from different design aesthetics," she explains. "I like spaces that are bright and uncluttered, with comfortable furniture and pieces that are unique and unexpected."

But remodeling an old house comes with challenges. For instance, a few months ago, they had already started to move in when they realized that some of the wood planks on the second floor had started to warp. They had to move out again for a few weeks to make way for the repairs. "A move isn't a move without at least one mishap," she admits.

When they bought the house, it was also completely bare and had zero greenery, so they had to work with a landscaper. Now, the plants give their home so much life.

Aside from those challenges, construction work was all the more difficult with the pandemic, and all the health restrictions and protocols. To make sure they keep everyone safe, they had to get the workers and delivery men tested for COVID-19 as often as possible. Some of the special permits also caused delays, and the whole process took longer than usual.

But with everything they've been through, Maxwell says buying the house was the best decision they've ever made. Now, she is currently "obsessed" with their dining room, with its bold and sophisticated wall paper, which compliments their light furniture that offers a rustic, natural take on classic design. While the setting can look a bit formal, the use of stone and wood furniture makes the place feel warm and inviting. And since they now have an outdoor space, she is also in love with their lanai, where she hangs out in the early mornings and late afternoons.

But it's not the place itself that makes this house her home, she reiterates. "A home is a haven, for you and family," Maxwell says. "It is the place to recharge yourself and feel completely relaxed and comfortable. What makes a house a home are the memories you build in it with your family."

Gonzalez, unsurprisingly, has a similar belief: A home's foundation is built on the people living in it. And just like their family's company, the dwellers create indelible, evolving moments. "Home is about family, friends that are family, and lots of laughter and love." ■