

The Pump Room
at Public in Chicago

DESIGN WITHOUT RESERVATION

From the cool, the quaint and the just downright quirky, design hotels around the globe are upping the style stakes to transform your standard accommodation experience into something extraordinary

Words by LEISHA PETRYS

Let's face it. A chocolate left on a goose-down pillow simply doesn't cut it as the epitome of service for most hotel guests anymore, even if it's imported from Switzerland's finest. When it comes to selecting a place to slumber away from home, whether it be for business or pleasure, modern-day travellers expect more - much, much more. So it's hardly surprising that same level of sophistication has also translated in what we expect from a hotel in terms of design. A token Eames recliner and a mural by the artist of the moment may have once impressed clientele, but it now takes a lot for a property to capture and more importantly retain the attention of aesthetic-savvy guests looking for that elusive wow factor.

The reason the bar has been raised is simple; two decades ago staying in a boutique hotel was unique in itself. It was the design that distinguished the experience. As we've come to expect the hotel environment to be anything but ordinary, the goal posts have shifted and high quality design is pretty much a given. Today we not only want all the creature comforts of the pillow menu and decadent bathroom products but we also need to leave feeling inspired or perhaps even transformed by our surroundings.

So how do hoteliers stand-out in a niche that's already overrun with good taste? For Kit Kemp, who together with husband Tim revolutionised the London boutique scene with such flagship properties such as Charlotte Street, The Soho and Haymarket Hotels, the key is all about injecting the flavour of the locale with a bespoke approach. "I think the hotel should offer a different world to the outside one," explains Kit. "They should be part of the village community. Even in a city, hotels should not feel like a vacuum-packed experience, but instead reflect where you are with an added element of glamour."

This considered design philosophy is no more apparent than when the pair ventured into the cobbled lanes of New York's SoHo. Whilst building the Crosby Street Hotel on a former Manhattan carparking lot, Kit noticed the local community's love of pampered pouches and captured this in art-form from canine papier mache to portraiture.

"Everywhere I looked in the streets I saw neighbours walking their dogs. It was an inspiration." The result adds a touch of whimsy and a natural talking point to the contemporary interior, ensuring their hotel is anything but formulaic. Of course the property also offers every luxury amenity imaginable, from the rooftop herb garden to a private screening room that seats almost one hundred, but it's that hard-to-bottle decorating flair that keeps the A-list loyal and is hard to replicate.

"Travelling should be an adventure and I think sometimes too strong a formula or too strong a brand can take away from the spontaneity of the experience," she says. "I like to bring back a bit of adventure and fun to our interiors. They shouldn't be too serious or conform in any way to a particular point of view. I hope this freshness comes across to a tired and jaded traveller."

Even though there's now eight properties under her Firmdale Hotels banner, no two are alike. Everything from the vibrant plush purple settee in the Covent Garden suite to the flamboyantly upholstered bed-heads at The

Knightsbridge are custom-made and carefully curated. "For the hotels we've designed so many things specifically for just our use, and I think that's what makes the hotels special. The fact that it's tailor made for a particular job and there are things you can't see anywhere else."

Among the newer breed of design hoteliers on the cutting-edge and attracting all the right kind of buzz is the Unlisted Collection, which takes abandoned character buildings in areas that have flatlined in the style stakes and resuscitates them back into the modern vernacular. The award-winning Wanderlust, found in the chaotic heart of Singapore's Little

India, is one such example and will never be in danger of being described as staid. The room decor includes saturated primary hues straight from the Pantone colour chart or guests can simply choose to fulfill childhood >

Cool diner vibe at the Ace Hotel and Swim Club



Mixing vintage with new technology at Ace



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The Library hotel



The facade of the Wanderlust, which fully illuminates at night



The Mono Princess Suite at Wanderlust

fantasies of sleeping in a spaceship capsule or even a treehouse.

The ethos of the Collection is fun but not at the expense of luxury and that's no more evident than at The Waterhouse at South Bund. The converted 1930s army barrack portrays a rustic fusion of old and new China, with just 19 exclusive rooms loaded with technological cons and that are privy to some of the most panoramic views of the surreal Shanghai skyline. While the minimal furnishings boast a veritable 'who's who' of design from the great Danes, Arne Jacobsen

and Hans Wegner, to pieces by former Yohji Yamamoto designer Kana Ishikawa, it's the spatial planning of this boutique that leaves a lingering impression. "The public places allow glimpses into the private rooms while the private spaces invite guests to peek into the public areas," explains marketing manager Rebecca Ye. "The result is a stay that both defines and distinguishes the visitors experience."

Legendary hotelier Ian Schrager - co-founder of Studio 54 and Palladium nightclubs and the man famous for inventing the 'urban resort' including Miami's famous Delano Hotel and London's Sanderson - is rejecting this need for "design on steroids" and is instead promoting an ideal that's both self-assured and authentic. "My hotels were never about design, they were about an attitude and an experience," he says. "I've seen far too many over-designed and over self-conscious hotels saturating marketplace."

That's not to say his latest pet project Chicago's PUBLIC is anything but stunning. The suites are decked out in a tastefully soothing, monochromatic palette to replicate the feeling of a home away from home. Sofas are covered in natural linen accented by raw steel nail heads, Thonet chairs are paired with sheepskin throws and rooms are beautifully accessorised with other design classics such as black steel Luxo lamps, Giacometti-inspired benches and Swedish wall clocks. Instead the focus is on service, ridding the hotel of superfluous services and maximising those that are valued such as allowing guests to customise their mini bars at check-in, as well as 'grab and go' snacks and toiletries, but most importantly



Dogs greet you at the entrance to Firdale's Crosby Street Hotel, NY

they offer a price that's reasonable. "It is the new simplicity, a sincere chic that is tasteful and understated, where quality and comfort are paramount," he says.

Experience seems the catchcry of the design hotel industry, as each property attempts to provide guests with enduring memories, not just an attractive place to put up their well-heeled feet. The major fashion houses may be relative newcomers to the scene, but are no less immune to this very ideal. Whether it's the understated elegance of the Bulgari Hotel & Residences or Diane von Furstenberg's brash print-filled penthouse suite at Queensland's Hayman Island or even the Middle East's relative newcomer, Armani, all want to present chic high-flyers with a chance to live their brand, even if it's only for a few days.

Missoni has lofty ambitions in this regard, with some 30 hotels in the works, and all set to get a dose of Rosita Missoni's riotous prints. So far, they have already ventured into Kuwait and Edinburgh and while both clearly convey the label's bold and passionate signature, the hotels also pay homage to the local setting. "The site context is a rich source of inspiration, whether the property sits in the bustling European city centre or faces the Arabian Gulf," says Elyza Falzon of the Rezidor Hotel Group. "Hotel Missoni

FUTURE NOW

Five of the globe's most cutting-edge design hotels

LA MAISON CHAMPS ELYSEES, PARIS

The first hotel to receive the Maison Martin Margiela touch, the restored 1866 Haussmannian townhouse is now a showcase for the renowned designer's bold aesthetic. A largely monochrome palette is found throughout this ultra-modern 40-roomed guest house which is kept from getting too serious with cheeky trompe l'oeil chandeliers, mirrored ceilings and wine bottle desk lamps.

PUBLIC, CHICAGO

The brainchild of titan hotelier, Ian Schrager - the man responsible for the iconic Studio 54 and the now famed Delano Hotel in Miami and Mondrian Hotel in West Hollywood, Public is the next incarnation of a design hotel, but one based on egalitarian principals. Without compromising on handsome interiors or quality service, the hotel offers room rates that are not only affordable but an absolute bargain.

THE ACE HOTEL & SWIM CLUB, PALM SPRINGS

A hipster's haven, this mid-century motel's recent facelift has become a favourite of the blogosphere for good reason. Alcapulco chairs mingle with vintage vinyl turntables in the unashamedly retro rooms - some even come complete with private garden patios and fireplaces.

WANDERLUST, SINGAPORE

Looking for some serenity? This is not your place. Four award-winning Singapore design agencies were each given creative license to transform a floor of this old school house. The result is a wacky mish-mash of bold design that allows guests to journey to space or count sheep in a pop art room that would make Andy Warhol proud.

the element of surprise is still essential for many design hotels. Guests need to be continually left in awe, whether it's because of the manner in which a suite flatters the existing landscape or takes an ordinary object and makes it remarkable.

At Koh Samui's The Library the 'it' factor is the Louboutin red-tiled swimming pool. The simple twist on an essential ingredient of a Thai vacation has helped catapult the resort as the only place to stay when visiting the island. Of course, the design appeal



The lobby of the Waterhouse at South Bund

Kuwait reflects the colours of its surroundings where shades of gold, turquoise and mosaics are used profusely in the design.

While the fashion houses can rely on their already well-established aesthetic trademarks, Kuwait extends beyond the captivating swimming pool thanks largely to the stark white minimalist buildings spread across 6,400 square metres of old-growth forest and well-thought out details such as the black beachfront tables that are reminiscent of traditional Chinese Mah Jong tabletops. The hotel's namesake, an in-house library stacked with some 1,300 titles also ensures it's a page turner. "For us, true luxury is defined not by material objects and brands but by the experiential values it provides," says owner Kasemtham Sornsong. "When guests leave here, I want them to feel that they have just left a magical place full of stories."

And for many us, that's the very essence of staying in a place filled with good design. It's a chance to share the experience on our return, to be able to relive the feeling of walking into a well-appointed lobby or opening the door of a palatial suite and remembering that very moment it took our breath away. ■