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NEW HOTEL DESIGN 2017

If anyone still doubts that innovative interior design resides in hotels these days, they haven't left home in a while. When *hinge* does its annual roundup of new hotel design, it's because of this fact. Hospitality designers have led the interiors field for some time, staking out new territory and experimenting with new concepts that subsequently make their way into other areas such as residential and F&B. Hoteliers need to compete for clients, and to do so they need to innovate and stay current; they need their properties to remain relevant. Design is as important to this as service standards – or perhaps even more so. And it's not just the sleepers; hotels nowadays can be urban social hubs, or rural wellness retreats. They often double as workspaces and meeting points, networking hubs and romance fosterers. Lobbies have become almost fully public zones, used by citizens as nodes of activity and interest. This is all to the benefit of operators; the more bodies want to enter the front door, even for a brief period, the greater the chance they'll spend money. As importantly, the more likely other bodies will be enticed to enter, too. Buzz is priceless to the hotel sector, and design is essential to buzz. So, hotel designers hold a fair amount of power to make or break a business. What they do with that power is what we look at here.

It seems long past the time one could scan new hotel design and identify trends. Fortunately, hotels have matured to include all manner of ideas and 'looks'. And they no longer mimic each other, at least not specifically. Obviously, as patrons learn to prefer certain amenities or tendencies, those choices will spread. But if anything unites hotel design right now, it's the impetus for individuality. Travellers crave the unique, and as hotels have become a more important component of their wanderings, that craving logically extends to where they sleep. Being 'local' is ever more important. And, by the way, hotels have become a major component of travel destinations, in the sense that we now include the hotel experience as part of the

larger, cultural one. In other words, we expect the hotel we choose to stay in to contribute to, or at least not detract from, our larger relationship with place. That means it is not merely the functional service provider we need in order to interact with a place – the bed, bathroom and breakfast in between the primary activities we engage in. It is now a significant member of those activities. These days people select hotels that can enhance their overall experience. So, being in Shanghai or Seminyak, Boston or Bogota, includes temporarily residing in a hotel that looks, feels and acts like it belongs there. Gone are the days when even business travellers sought uniformity across the world. Can you remember the last time you saw a hotel advert boasting about offering you the same thing in every one of its locations? Perhaps 1987. Apart from upholding universal standards of service, hoteliers now pride themselves on the opposite: adaptation to local context. To what extent they actually achieve that is up for debate, but the fact is, even a Hilton or Marriott fears being thought of as generic.

This is all for the betterment of design.

But how far can hotel design take interior design generally? After all, hotels are mostly made up of bedroom suites, lobbies and restaurants. And lots of corridors and lift lobbies. What can this limited kit of parts really do for all the varied elements of residential design or office spaces? Well, to take just one obvious example, there is little argument that bathrooms have undergone a revolution in design over the past decade or so, and that is due primarily to hotels transforming the bathrooms that accompany every room. The realisation that bathrooms are a highly used space in the standard hotel guestroom led the sector's leaders to put much more time and thought into their design. And spatial constraints prompted innovation. The now-ubiquitous opening up of bathrooms may have been prompted by their common lack of exterior windows, but the results fed directly into residential design in no time. To

the extent that in some cases (hotels or houses) the bedroom is now almost an auxiliary to the bathroom, versus the other way round. Another example might be the maximisation of storage space. Hotel rooms need to provide efficient if temporary storage space for suitcases, clothing, work material, televisions, etcetera, usually in a small overall room. And so designers spend many hours microplanning storage space and surfaces, which in turn informs the furniture industry that also serves offices and homes. Often the ideas and gadgets and furniture pieces we come to take for granted began life in the creative imagination of hotel designers. You could say necessity there led to invention elsewhere. Possibly the designers who specialise in the office or retail sectors could make similar claims to broader impact, but we remain sceptical. Insofar as a hotel room is a short-term, miniaturised 'home' environment, it has had an outsized impact on residential interior design.

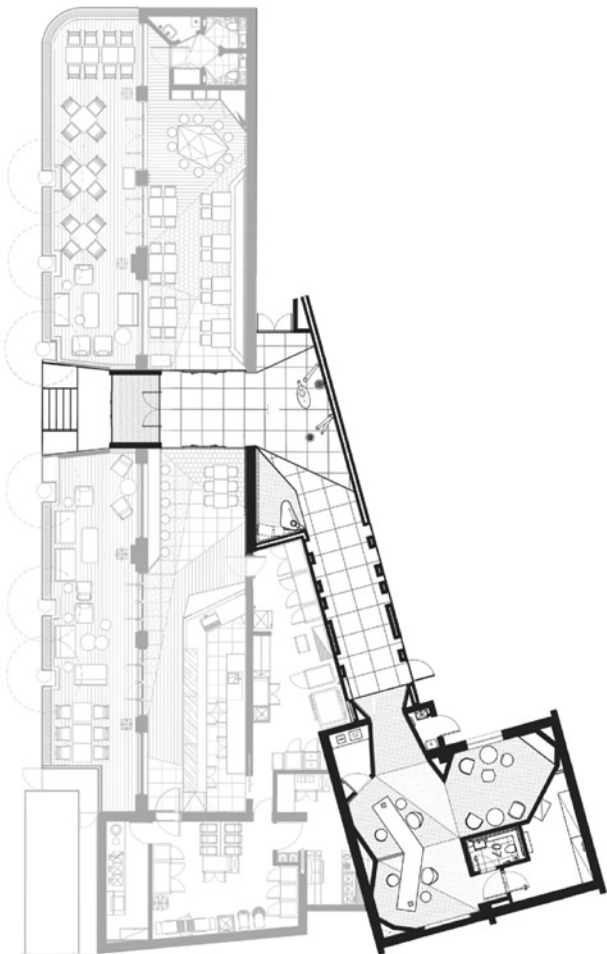
And that short-term aspect has been central to the willingness of operators and designers to push the edges a bit in terms of aesthetics. After all, when occupants stay only a night or two, they tend to be more open to things they might think are too 'out there' for their regular residence, whether it's a bathtub in the middle of the bed area, or an outlandish wallpaper. But make no mistake: guests steal plenty of ideas from hotels. At times to their chagrin, people borrow something they've seen in a pleasant hotel and try to apply it to their own living room or bedroom. That's when they learn that interior designers do it better. Whether edgy or classic, boutique or resort, hotel design is difficult. If it works, it means that someone or some team has had the energy and talent to make everything mesh seamlessly into a compelling whole. The simpler it looks, the more successful they've been. It is a high-stakes game, and not for the mediocre.

That's why we love doing this story. Let's see what the best are up to this year.

VUE HOTEL HOUHAI

BEIJING, CHINA
MINISTRY OF DESIGN

Photography by Edward Hendricks



Colin Seah of MOD is no stranger to hospitality design, but this is the firm's first hotel project in Beijing. The hip capital city already hosts a number of edgy places to crash in, so MOD's foray had to hold its own. The lakeside site in Houhai, at the heart of Beijing, didn't hurt; it is something of a leafy oasis within the notoriously polluted urban centre. The boutique VUE brand takes pride in bringing unique design to characteristic neighbourhoods and properties. Indeed, this is Design Hotels' first entry in Beijing. The whimsical design is modern and a bit cheeky, with references to local culture and tastes, but also with an eye to international preferences when it comes to the actual accommodations.

Ministry of Design was given responsibility for all aspects of the project, from architecture down to the look of staff uniforms and even the website. It's the kind of commission designers long for, and Seah threw himself into it with gusto. The low-rise complex is near a number of bars and cafes wrapping the edge of the lake. VUE was an adaptive reuse project. A series of structures built in the 1950s has been reconfigured into the property. The landscaped gardens are a central feature of VUE. MOD toned the nondescript exteriors a dark charcoal grey, then added spots of bright colour, including gold accents, to dress them up. Occupying a former warehouse is a new bakery-cafe, while a gym and rooftop bar round out the support spaces to the 80 guestrooms and suites. The original buildings were a hotchpotch: some 'boasted' add-on Chinese touches such as gargoyles and latticed window frames while others were pared-down functional volumes. MOD has unified these through the smart use of colour, and by emphasising the garden greenery. But by accenting some of the features in gold, the design tries to reinterpret them anew. The gently ironic approach transforms some unfortunate design elements into positives. A new motif appears in various modes. Based on an abstraction of Chinese lattices, the "ice-ray" pattern informs colours, floors and hallways, even built-in furniture or wall features.

The interiors are decidedly contemporary, with MOD's signature bold use of colour. There are numerous additions of shiny gold and coppery tones, as well as deep mauves and mustard yellows and royal blues. And plenty of black. The dark tone is used as a unifying backdrop to many parts of VUE, the better to make the brighter hues pop out. Interestingly, the guestrooms themselves are the most 'quiet' in terms of colour tone, and lean toward greys and monochrome black and white. Perhaps these are conceived as respites from the general liveliness of the public areas, although the suites also include occasional pieces in lemon or fuchsia, among other sharp tones.

There is no question they are luxurious, however, with large bathing areas and enough marble to remind we are in China. The cafe goes another direction, with light painted brick walls and blond wood furnishings. In fact MOD has included an unusually wide range of materials and colour bands in VUE, and it is testament to the studio's command of both that it all comes together smoothly - it could easily have gone south.

The chill rooftop terrace epitomises VUE. Affording gorgeous sights of the lake metres away, it is the ideal place to start the day or end the night. Beijing's well-earned reputation for hipness is evident here. Patrons and local visitors will no doubt make it a favourite destination, and hang out here, enjoying the Vue.



