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Middle East

INSIDE *interiors*

Why hotel interior designers must focus on marrying tradition with originality

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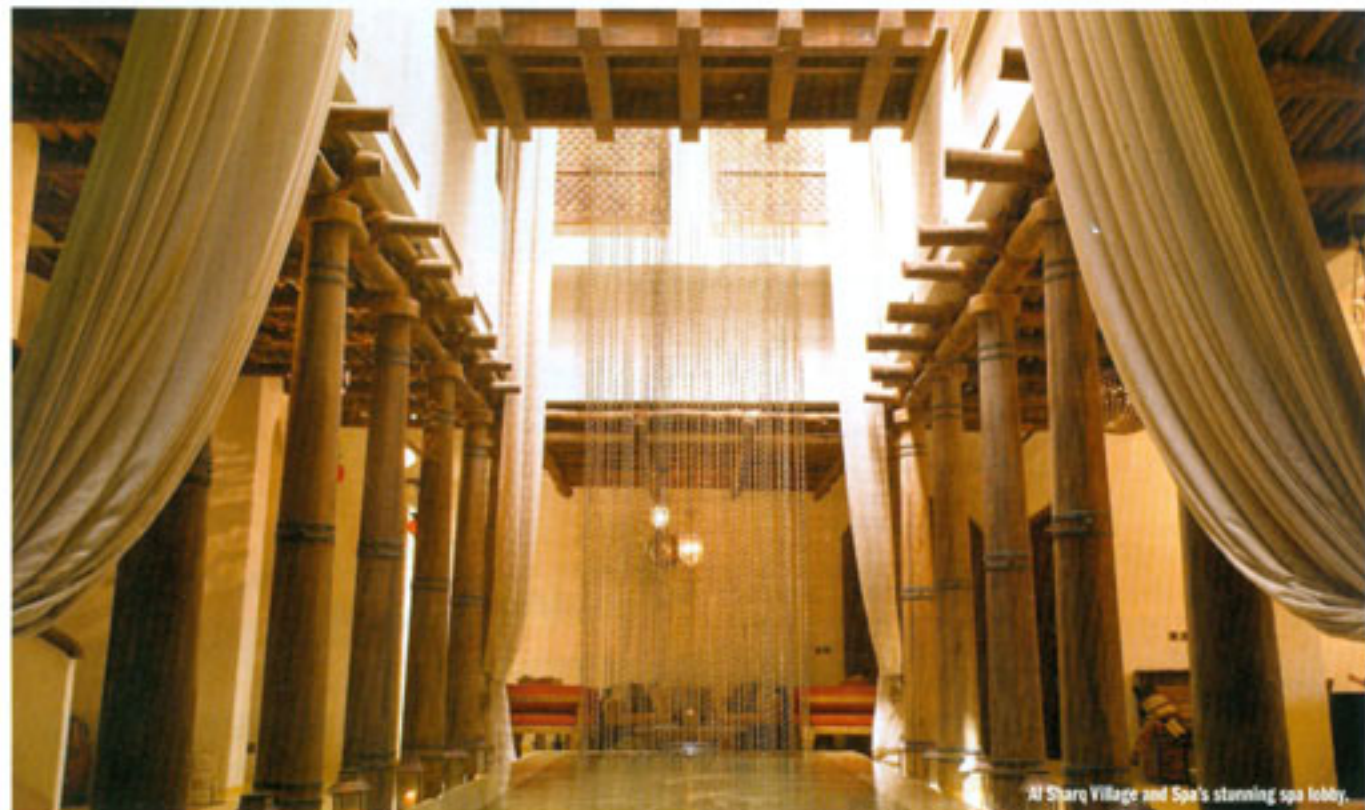
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HOTEL DESIGN AND FURNITURE SUPPLEMENT

The competitive world of hotel interiors

It's no easy task for the The Middle East's interior design industry, constantly devising original, functional and attractive new hotel concepts. **Lucy Taylor** considers the challenge of making the perfect first impression



Al Sharq Village and Spa's stunning spa lobby.

INTERIORS

First impressions are a key factor in any new relationship — and the one between a hotel and its guests is no different.

It should come as no surprise then that just as a person may be cursorily judged on their clothes and appearance, so a hotel is judged on its interior. Someone turning up for an interview with dirty clothes and messy hair will understandably create a bad impression; similarly, shabby, unkempt décor can put potential guests off a hotel.

Personal taste will also come into play: as different people will not necessarily find the same

person attractive, so a hotel interior will appeal to certain tastes more than others.

Ultimately, to capture a guest's interest, a hotel must present itself favourably right from the start of the acquaintance — which is why the right interior design is imperative.

MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East's hotels boast several notable design successes.

London-based design firm WA International, responsible for hotel interiors such as the Al Bustan Rotana in Muscat and Dubai's Hyatt Regency, is currently working on the Sofitel Al Zallaq Beach Resort, Bahrain. Discussing this recent project,

the company's senior designer Adrian Battisby explains: "The motivation behind the concept was to create an experience of being in an authentic Bahraini home, the feeling of a warm, heartfelt welcome. To achieve this, [we] extensively researched Bahraini architecture with site visits to exquisite traditional courtyard homes."

The idea of reflecting local culture and offering an 'authentic' experience is a popular trend, as Doha property Al Sharq Village and Spa's general manager Hoss Vetry comments.

"The main focus of this project was to make it the ultimate Qatari experience," Vetry explains.

Another big trend today is ho-

tel-serviced apartments, which, as long-term residences, require slightly different handling.

For example Jumeirah Living, Jumeirah Group's luxury brand of serviced residences, says it aims to offer "innovative and truly personal lifestyle experiences unique to each guest, resident and owner with a strong emphasis on effortless living", achieved via the use of state-of-the-art technology, sumptuous finishes and contemporary design, as Jumeirah Living general manager Julie Shields elaborates.

"[We will] incorporate signature services into the design of the properties, including a residents' lounge as well as a lifestyle concierge team on hand to create

a personalised and truly unique living experience," she says.

The very first luxury Jumeirah Living property, the World Trade Centre Residence in Dubai, will open in August 2008, with one- to four-bedroom residences spread over 40 floors.

DESIGN INSPIRATION

So with so much choice, how does a hotel settle on one particular interiors concept?

Al Sharq's Vetry firmly believes authenticity should play an integral part.

"I think many hotel designs today are very generic, where you could literally lift the building, put it in another city and you wouldn't notice anything was out of place," he says.

"The great thing about this hotel is that it gives a sense of place. And thanks to the amazing architecture and interior decorative touches, it feels truly Qatari.

"The interior design team was an Italian firm called Di Leonardo, and it was all overseen by our owning company," he adds.

At Al Zallaq Beach Resort in Bahrain, set to open in 2009, similar emphasis has been placed on ensuring the details are authentic, says WA International's Battisby. "The entrance lobby immediately portrays Bahrain, with carved wooden cornices, lacy bronze lanterns and soft sandstone floors reflecting the local style," he says.

Another decision-influencing factor is the target clientele.

Jumeirah's Shields says the inspiration behind Jumeirah Living's World Trade Centre Residence was to create "the epitome of refined living".

"It uses contemporary yet timeless décor to convey a light, spacious feel," she explains.

This effect was achieved using glass, wood, marble, bespoke



A lounge at Jumeirah Living's World Trade Centre Residence.

fabrics and state-of-the-art systems and appliances, following a concept devised by Hazel Wong — the designer who worked on Jumeirah Emirates Towers.

FURNITURE

And materials aren't the only element that must be carefully considered; another essential

part of setting the tone is a room's furnishings.

WA International's design director Claire Craig says the company sources and designs every piece to complement each individual space. "Most of the furniture is inspired by local tradition mixed with contemporary pieces, to resemble someone's home;

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A design for Jumeirah Living's executive suite.

the home of a person who has carefully collected these pieces over time," she explains.

Jumeirah's Shields agrees furniture is "absolutely crucial" in creating the perfect ambience.

"We've employed a contemporary interior design [theme], with Italian-made designer furniture provided by a company called B&B Italia," she says.

Al Sharq's Vetry adds that it's essential not to compromise on any element of the interior.

"This hotel wasn't a cheap project," he admits. "But when you see it you realise it was worth it. The details are the key to the property's whole ambience."

"We have many classic pieces, such as the leather chairs in the lobby; and the Royal Villa feature some superb pieces: heavy, mahogany furniture inlaid with marble. These are by a company called Maitland-Smith, from the United States," Vetry says. "The overall effect is extremely elegant and traditional."

COMPETITION

Given the clear importance of interior design, and the numerous new hotels mushrooming across the region, it is no surprise that the industry is thriving. But is it all plain sailing, or are there hidden challenges facing designers?

WA International's Battsby says sustainability has become

an important issue. "We as designers should be responsible, not just in the selection of 'green' building products and recycling but also in our own working practices," he says.

Shweta Parida, editor-in-chief of Dubai-based e-zine De5ign.com, has worked in the interior design industry for several years but previously studied hotel management. During her time in the industry, she has observed growing competition between hotels for the grandest or most unusual interiors, and warns it is important to remember that there needs to be a certain level of practicality involved in design projects as well.

"I think in the long run it's always the hotel that can provide its guest with the best experience in terms of service, comfort, and so on that's going to win," she says. "You can have the fanciest, jazziest hotel in the world, but if it does not meet the demands of the guest it's not going to be in the running for very long."

However increasing competition in the region demands that designers think outside the box.

WA International's Battsby explains that the Al Zallaq Beach Resort concept is a unique one. "The hotel property features wonderful beach-frontage and an exclusive Thalasso seawater spa," he adds.

Jumeirah's Shields says the residential product also offers scope to develop interiors after the initial fit-out.

"Our lifestyle concierge team will help make the [resident's] home special," she explains. "From finding the perfect spot to hang their art before they move in to organising fresh flowers, the team will create an exclusive, personalised living experience."

TRENDS

With so many new concepts churned out every year, it is essential for interior companies to keep on top of changing trends.

According to De5ign.com's Parida, people are increasingly realising the value and significance of design.

"It's not just about a 'home away from home' — nobody wants that anymore," she says. "If you want that, you can stay in your home. People are looking for a different experience, one that's worth the money and their time, because it's a jet-set age; everyone's busy all the time."

"So designers have to come up with the perfect balance to provide guests with multiple experiences simultaneously."

"And it's no longer about the traditional brands," Parida continues. "There is a trend moving away from them, towards niche boutique properties catering to the urban yuppies and the people who look for a lifestyle experience in whatever they do. That's undoubtedly one of the reasons why you have all these labels jumping onto the bandwagon — obviously they have recognised the demand for it."

However luxury trends are changing, notes Parida. "Earlier luxury would mean plush sofas, the biggest chandeliers — it's not necessarily about that anymore, it's about how well the hotel can represent what it's selling," she says.

FUTURE

It seems today's designers must create spaces that encapsulate authenticity, comfort and exclusivity; no mean feat. So how will these criteria change over the next few years?

WA International's Craig believes the desire for a more informal check-in, with hotels introducing a lobby lounge check-in or even checking-in in the guestroom, will change the whole lobby concept. "This will mean we see more comfortable seating areas within the hotel lobby and less of a need for a large reception desk," she says.

De5ign.com's Parida notes that the region is still very geared towards Arabesque design.

"It works well here," she admits. "It's what people want when they are visiting the region. They want to see an Arabian nights-style scene."

"I don't see that changing any time soon but I seriously hope it does eventually, otherwise you end up with all these cookie-cutter buildings where there's no real distinction and you can't differentiate one from the other."

"I think it's nice to keep an element of the culture and the heritage, but in the process you have to strike a balance in terms of originality, because that is one factor that's getting lost," she adds.

However Parida believes this region is impressively focused on "pushing boundaries".

"The potential and possibilities for design regarding the region's hotels are just infinite nowadays; money's not a problem, so it almost gives interior designers out here a carte blanche — they have a blank canvas to do whatever they want," she says.

"But it's important to strike the right balance [between aesthetics and functionality], and not to get carried away by the element of competition." ■