

100 PAGES

Travel 2026



Thoughtful design, one page at a time.

“We travel, initially, to lose ourselves; and we travel, next, to find ourselves.”

— Pico Iyer

Cover image: Bab Al Shams Dubai

From the Editor

It has been an extraordinary summer behind the scenes, even if very little of it has been visible from the outside.

The biggest piece of work has been bringing my UK, USA and UAE websites together into a single, consolidated home for everything I publish. It is something I had been considering for a while, and the feedback I kept hearing was the same: readers wanted one place to find the work, not three. Every article that has made the move has also been enhanced along the way, not simply transferred across. The real change is searchability. You can now filter by country, by new categories, and find a project in seconds rather than remembering which site it originally lived on. Projects and designs stay prominent in one place, and nothing gets lost between platforms any more. It has taken time to get right, but the result is exactly the resource I set out to build.

100 Pages of Design also passed a milestone I am genuinely proud of. We have now had over 100,000 reads and downloads of the magazine, and we are already fast approaching 200,000. To everyone who has picked up an issue, shared one, or simply taken an interest along the way, thank you. None of this happens without you, and every milestone still means as much as the last.

Onto the magazine itself. With three issues now behind us, it felt like the right moment to turn to a new subject for the 100 Pages brand: Design Travel. Everyone has travel on the mind at the moment, and rightly so, and this special is built around that: the beauty of travel, and how the design experience shapes a holiday, an attraction, or a single moment within one.

I have deliberately built this issue around range. It moves from things close to home, staycations and the kind of restaurant worth travelling for, right through to resorts and further, more topical escapes. Wherever you are looking to go, or however far you are looking to travel, there should be something in these pages for you. It is a subject I have wanted to give proper space to for some time, and this felt like the right issue to finally do it.

There is more to come. I have some exciting announcements and milestones to share soon, and this feels like only the beginning.

Thank you, as always, for being part of the journey.

Martyn White



Kira at Marsa Al Arab

Verhaal Studio built a Japanese Mediterranean restaurant around a single plant whose seed pods dry translucent, and everything in the room is a version of that one idea.



A restaurant serving two cuisines needs one device that belongs equally to both. Kira, at Jumeirah Marsa Al Arab, found it in a plant. Verhaal Studio, whose co-founder Neydine Bak led the scheme, built the interior around Lunaria, known in English as honesty or the silver dollar plant, whose seed pods dry into thin, papery discs the light passes through, and the property they took from it is not a colour or a motif. It is an optical one: translucency, and the way light behaves when it passes through something thin rather than bouncing off something solid. A property Japanese and Mediterranean interiors have each prized independently, for centuries, in shoji screens and mashrabiya alike.

Everything in the room is a version of that single observation. The chandelier above the bar, the layered light across the ceiling, the 860 bottle wine display standing at the centre of the floor. Each is something luminous that you look at and through at the same time. Once you know where the idea came from, the whole restaurant resolves, and the pieces that might otherwise read as separate gestures turn out to be one decision repeated in four materials. That is the discipline of the scheme, and it runs all the way down: a single property carried through glass, gold, thread and stone, doing a different job in each material and the same job in the room. Very few interiors are built on an idea narrow enough to be checked like that.

It starts working on you well before the door. From the entrance you are directed down a winding path of foliage, dense enough that the hotel disappears behind you. It reads as jungle, and it removes you from Dubai. There is no view out, no sightline forward, and no indication of how much further there is to go. Then the planting opens onto a door, and you have arrived.

That approach is a hidden oasis, and it has been very carefully planned. It is also, in structural terms, the same device as everything inside. A screen of planting is a filter. It admits light, breaks it up, obscures the view and dissolves the boundary between one place and the next, which is precisely the job a shoji screen or a mashrabiya does in timber and stone. Before you have seen a single object that Verhaal Studio specified, you have already been passed through something and had your view of the world softened by it.

Staff were waiting at the door, and going through it delivers another shift in the senses. The move from that green, enclosed, humid approach into the cool of the room beyond is the most effective thing the design does, costing nothing but sequence. The bar is as much a feast for the eyes as anything that arrives at the table, and the order is deliberate. You are fed visually first, from the approach onward, and the food follows.



A plant that becomes transparent

Lunaria produces flat, round seed pods. As they dry, the outer skins fall away and leave a papery central membrane behind, silvery and thin enough to see light through. It is one of the few plants whose most beautiful state is the one it reaches after it has finished living. Florists keep it for exactly that reason: it holds its shape indefinitely and it glows when backlit.

The clearest statement of the idea is the glass chandelier above the bar, which draws the eye the moment you are inside. It is built to filter light the way a stand of Lunaria does, so what falls beneath it is not an even wash but a shifting, dappled pattern. That is a considerably harder brief than a decorative fitting, because the piece has to be judged by what it does to the surfaces underneath rather than by how it looks switched off.

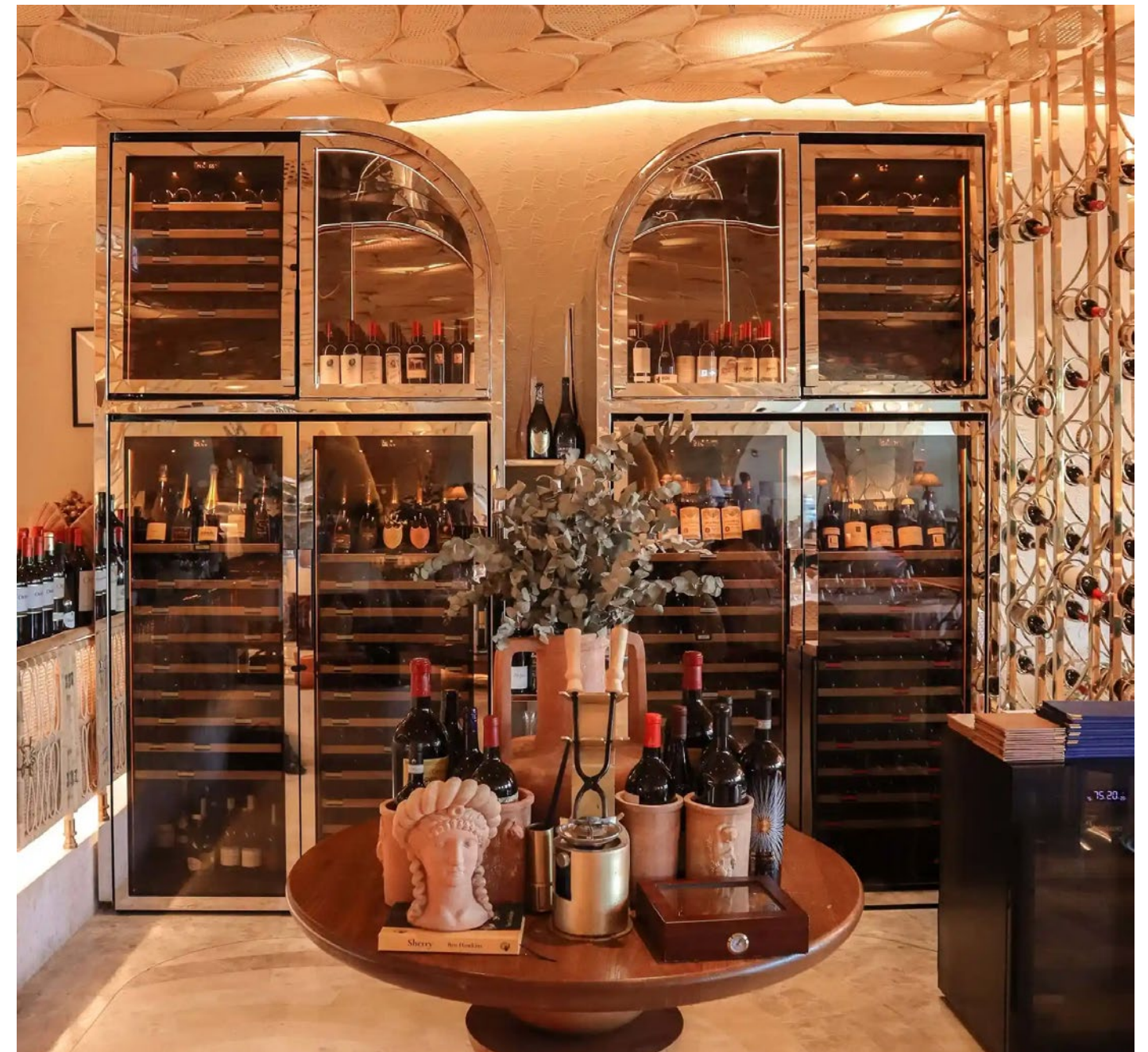
Japanese architecture has organised itself around translucency for centuries. A shoji screen is a timber grid faced in paper, and its purpose is to admit light while withholding the view, dividing space without darkening it. Light in a traditional Japanese interior is almost always light that has passed through something first.

The Mediterranean and the wider region arrived at the same instinct by a different route. Mashrabiya screens, pierced stone and the thin sheets of alabaster set into Mediterranean churches all do the identical job: they take harsh sun and turn it into something diffuse and patterned. In a hot climate a screen is climate control before it is decoration.

That is why the Lunaria choice is cleverer than it first appears. A restaurant serving Japanese and Mediterranean food needed a device belonging equally to both, and it found one in a plant. Not a blend of two styles, but a single property two traditions arrived at independently and have prized for centuries.

Around it the palette stays quiet enough to let the light do the work: soft neutrals, terracotta tones, and buttery gold leaf used as an accent rather than a finish. Gold leaf is the correct material for this argument, because leaf is beaten so thin that it is functionally a membrane. It picks up light and throws it back in exactly the way the concept requires.





The wine is part of the room

The display holds 860 bottles, and it was designed and delivered by Cellar Concept, the Dubai studio founded by Maxime Poukhnoi, using EuroCave Revelation cabinets. It does not read as a facility installed in a restaurant. It feels like part of the surroundings, so the wine is the venue rather than something provided within it.

It is the same optical idea again in a different material. A lit wine wall is a translucent screen: glass in front, glass behind, bottles of coloured glass in between, and light passing through all of it. Stand before it and you are looking at the collection and through the collection at once, at a soft, layered, luminous plane. It is the Lunaria condition rendered in glass, at a far larger scale, with the light coming from behind.

It also solves a plan problem. A restaurant this size needs a centre, something that tells you where you are and gives the floor a heart to organise around. Usually that job goes to a bar or an open kitchen. Here it goes to the wine, which is the more unusual choice and, for a room whose entire argument is light, the better one.

Eight hundred and sixty backlit bottles are a far more interesting light source than a bar back. It is a mesmerising thing to walk past on the way to a table, and the reason it holds is that it was drawn as part of the room rather than specified into it. The whole assembly is seamless and connected, which is harder than it sounds when the object also has to work as a functioning store. A restaurant this size usually keeps its cellar out of sight. Here it is the first thing worth looking at, and the thing you remember.



In a Gulf summer, a wine wall is an engineering decision

Wine is perishable and its tolerances are narrow. It wants a steady temperature, controlled humidity, no ultraviolet light and no vibration. Warmth accelerates ageing, swings push wine past the cork, dry air shrinks corks and lets air in, and sunlight degrades what is in the bottle. Now put that at the visual centre of a room in Dubai, in a building with terraces, glazing and service doors, where the outside air spends months of the year above forty degrees.

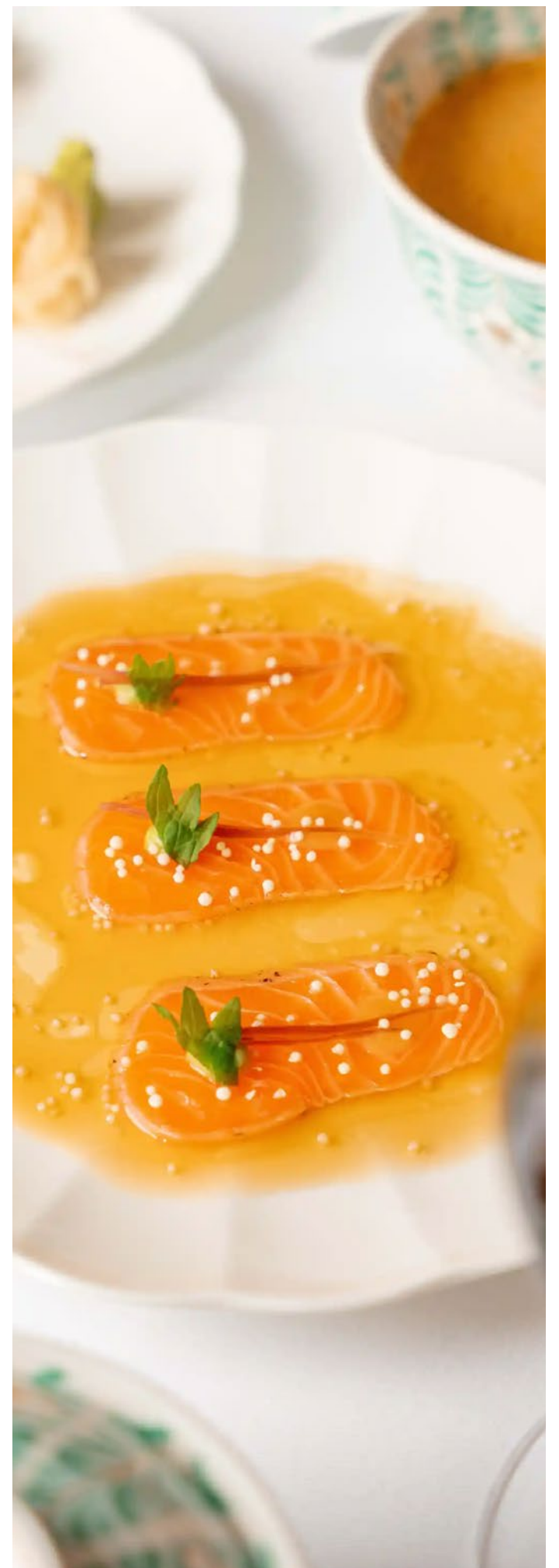
That is what the EuroCave cabinets are there to do. Each unit governs its own temperature and humidity, so the display works as a functioning store rather than as set dressing, and the glazing admits the light that makes it beautiful while excluding the part of the spectrum that would spoil it. The technical requirement and the aesthetic ambition point the same way, which is why it feels connected rather than installed.

Three craft commissions carry the concept into material form. Japanese embroidery reads as pattern from across the room and as individual stitches up close. Italian mosaic is built from thousands of small reflective units that scatter light. Hand-painted blue ceramics supply the one strong colour note against the neutrals, and blue against gold runs through both decorative traditions.

There is also a case for timing. Kira's daytime menu, Hirugami, runs Monday to Friday from midday to 2pm, priced at AED 255 for a soup, two starters and a main. The restaurant calls it the quiet beauty of daytime, which is worth taking as a design argument rather than a scheduling note. A room built around light behaving through a translucent screen performs differently at noon than after dark. Most guests will only ever see Kira at night. Lunch is the sitting it was drawn for.

What stays with you is the sequence. That planted path takes Dubai away for ninety seconds and hands you back a different place at the other end, already prepared for what follows. Everything after it is the same idea carried through in glass and gold and thread. It began before you were through the door.

<https://kira-restaurant.com/kira/>
Photography courtesy of Kira / Jumeirah Group



Heckfield Place

A Georgian house with no recorded architect, brought back over nine years.
The argument here is not the farm but the makers, and the bronze left to dull.

There is a kind of country house hotel that arrives fully formed, its references legible from the car park. Heckfield Place is not that. It opened in September 2018, nine years after planning consent was granted in 2009, on a house most people had last seen as a corporate training centre.

The estate runs to 438 acres near Hook in Hampshire, less than an hour from London, with a farm, a market garden, seven glasshouses, two lakes, a pinetum and a 67 seat cinema in the basement. Almost everything written about it leads on the farming, which is very good. It is also not where the design argument lives.

The better way in is the furniture. Somebody at Heckfield decided that the objects in the house should be commissioned rather than specified, from workshops that could be named, using materials that could be traced to a particular river or a particular woodland, and named for it.

That decision runs from the bulrush in the headboards to the bronze on the doors, and it is the real argument on this estate. It is also a slow one. Almost none of it announces itself in a photograph, which is a commercially awkward position for a hotel to take, and the estate has taken it anyway. Heckfield put the money into the door handles.

The house was built between 1763 and 1766 for Jane Hawley, a widow who paid for it out of trust funds held for her infant son. No architect is recorded, which for a building of this quality is unusual, and it sets the tone for a house that has always been more legible through its occupants than through the hand that drew it.

It is Grade II listed, and the list description calls it a large mansion of classical form: a central block of three storeys with two storey wings and attics, red brick laid in Flemish bond with stone dressings, a modillion cornice, rusticated quoins and a pierced balustrade over the entrance. The interiors are recorded as a rich Victorian restoration in the classical manner, which means the Georgian house you think you are looking at is largely a nineteenth century reading of itself.

The twentieth century did what it did to houses of this size. Heckfield became a conference and training centre in 1981 and 1982, was acquired by Racal Electronics, served as Vodafone's staff training centre from 1985 and ran as the Thales Commercial University until 2002. Gerald Chan, co-founder of the Boston firm Morningside Group, bought it that year, and has been direct about his own part in it: no designer did anything there without his approval.





The hardest part was the subtraction

The architect for the restoration and the estate masterplan is Spratley & Partners of Henley-on-Thames, with Sarah Tassell as project director. The work covered 83,000 square feet, alongside a masterplan that converted the gate lodge and gardener's cottage for guests and rebuilt Home Farm.

The most consequential move was removal. The 1980s conference facilities and the bedroom block were taken out, and rooms subdivided for corporate use were reinstated to their original proportions. This is the least photogenic work on any listed building project and the part that decides whether everything else can succeed. You cannot furnish your way out of a room that is the wrong shape.

What was then added is declared as new rather than blended in. A structural glass link connects the manor to the restaurant. The stair down to the basement cinema runs past walls of Cotswold rubble stone, with a bronze balustrade on stone treads. Handmade brick in Flemish bond and clay roof tiles carry the new fabric.

The interiors are by Ben Thompson of BWT London, who trained at Studioilse under Ilse Crawford. That lineage shows in the work: the same interest in how a room supports the body, the same suspicion of decoration that does no work. His framing of the difficulty is sharp. "The challenge was to be brave enough to treat Heckfield Place as a home, while having a hotel operation run unobtrusively in the background."

The material decisions follow from that. Lime plaster on the walls, chosen because it takes light softly and keeps moving with the building. English oak floors picked for grain rather than uniformity. Bare brickwork left visible where the fabric warranted it. Muted greys, greens and blues, pale marble in Marle, polished brass at the bar, oak trusses in the Long Room.

Two details tell you how the project was thought about. The electronic door locks, the great enemy of any historic bedroom, are hidden behind white linen hoops. And the sequence of rooms was planned around daylight. "The movement of the sun was important in leading one's day through the building," Thompson has said, which is a planning principle rather than a decorating one.





One hundred and ten pieces

Special Branch Furniture developed and manufactured 110 unique pieces with Thompson's studio, in their own workshop, with traditionally trained cabinet makers. The schedule is specific in a way that furniture schedules almost never are.

Twenty one sets of butler's trays in European oak, unlacquered brass and vegetable-tanned leather. A retail cabinet in limed oak fitted with Carl Auböck handles. A run of oak tiffins combining steam-bent frames with oak swill weave from Cumbrian woodland. That weaving was done by Owen Jones, one of very few people still practising Cumbrian oak swill basketry, a craft that means boiling and riving oak into thin bands and working them green.

Felicity Irons, a master rush weaver in Bedfordshire, made the woven rugs and the bed headboards from bulrush she cuts herself, from a punt, on the Great Ouse. A headboard named for its river is unusual.

Then the ironmongery. John Planck Ltd worked here from 2009 to 2018, the full nine years, casting solid bronze door furniture to match Georgian originals. The bronze was left unlacquered on purpose, so it would patinate under use. It was specified to look older with age, not the day it opened.

Heckfield Place, Hampshire. Architecture Spratley & Partners. Interiors Ben Thompson, BWT London. Landscape Todd Longstaffe-Gowan. Furniture Special Branch, Benchmark, George Smith. Rush weaving Felicity Irons. Basketry Owen Jones. Ironmongery John Planck Ltd. Opened September 2018.

<https://www.heckfieldplace.com/>
Photography courtesy of Heckfield Place



Aman Venice

A sixteenth-century palazzo on the Grand Canal, restored by Jean-Michel Gathy on the theory that after five centuries, restraint beats reinvention.



Aman built its reputation on a simple formula: very few rooms, a serious sense of place, and restraint applied until it stops looking like a decision at all. Aman Venice, set inside the Palazzo Papadopoli on the Grand Canal, is that formula written for a city that already has an opinion about every hotel that arrives in it.

The palazzo was designed by Giangiacomo dei Grigi for the Coccina family, one of the merchant dynasties whose money built this stretch of the canal, and was complete by 1570. It passed in 1864 to the Papadopoli, whose name the building still carries. Five centuries of alteration are layered into the fabric, which is the condition any Venetian restoration actually has to work with, not around.

The designer is Jean-Michel Gathy of Denniston, working on a building that resists the usual hotel moves. You cannot add a floor to a listed palazzo, cannot widen a corridor, cannot treat the ceiling height of a sixteenth-century piano nobile as negotiable. Gathy's decision was not to fight any of it.

Framing the past, not recreating it

That is the studio's own description of the approach, and it holds up better than most design mission statements because it names a method rather than a mood. Historic fabric stays legible throughout. Contemporary intervention is kept quiet enough that the building is what you notice first, not the hotel sitting inside it.

Just twenty four rooms and suites occupy a palazzo that could easily have held three times that number, and the restraint is itself the clearest evidence of the method. A smaller count means every room can be larger, every ceiling can stay at its original height, and the palazzo's own proportions do more of the work than a furniture schedule could.

It also means Aman Venice never competes with itself. There is no annexe, no lower-graded wing. Every room sits inside the same historic envelope, under the same frescoed or coffered ceilings, a discipline most hotels cannot afford.





Two gardens, which has nothing to do with taste

Venice has almost no private outdoor space of any size, and Aman Venice has two, generally reckoned among the only private gardens of real scale left on the Grand Canal. That is a fact about real estate before it is a fact about design: the gardens survive because this plot happened to keep them.

Most plots on this stretch of canal were built wall to wall, gardens swallowed by later extensions.

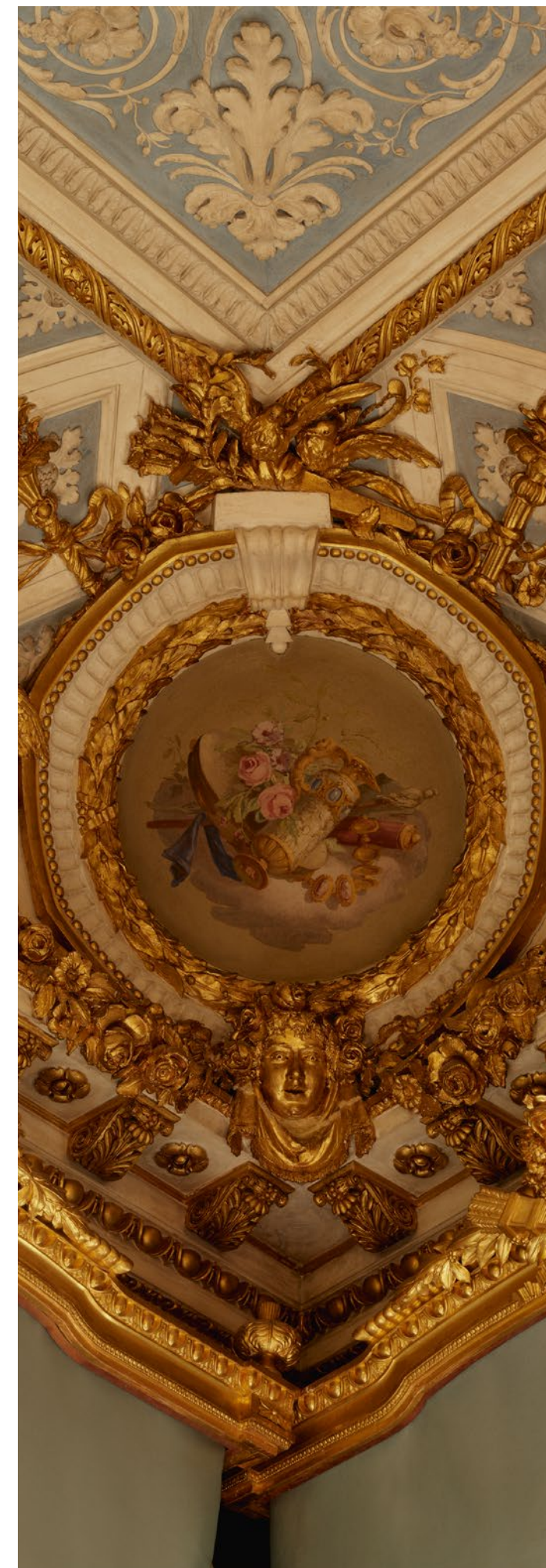
The two are used differently. One is a quiet arrival and a place to sit before dinner, planted rather than landscaped, which suits a city where most greenery is a window box. The other opens off the ground floor rooms, giving them what almost no address on the canal can offer: a private outdoor room at water level.

Coffee, wine and long conversations happen in both, and the hotel treats them as functioning rooms rather than as scenery glimpsed from a corridor on the way to somewhere else, a distinction fewer hotels with a courtyard make than claim to, and one that only really works if the garden is large enough to sit in properly.

A library that was never rebuilt to look like one

The seventeenth century library keeps its original bookcases and its Murano chandeliers, and the room has not been redressed to read as a library, because it already was one. Most hotel libraries are built from scratch to imitate the idea of a library. This one only had to be kept.

Murano glass recurs throughout, in chandeliers original to the palazzo and in fittings chosen to sit beside them without competing, a harder brief than commissioning something new outright.





A ceiling you are meant to see lying down

The Alcova Tiepolo Suite takes its name from the obvious feature: an original ceiling fresco by Giambattista Tiepolo, visible from the bed, said to be the only hotel room in Venice with a Tiepolo ceiling over the pillow rather than the salon. It is the kind of detail that would be a gimmick anywhere else and is simply a fact of the building here.

Frescoes at this scale are not moved, cleaned to look new, or lit like museum pieces. They are structural to the room, in the sense that the room was designed around not disturbing them, which is a harder constraint than adding decoration ever is. The eighteenth century painted the ceiling. The task left to this restoration was everything below it.

The grand staircase carries the same logic in a more public register: stained glass, a marble balustrade, a run of steps built for a merchant house, not a hotel corridor. Two piano nobili, the principal floors that define a palazzo's status, hold the largest suites and the tallest ceilings, neither subdivided to add extra keys.

Terrazzo floors, damask walls and gilded plasterwork carry the interior register through the rooms Tiepolo never touched, and the palette stays close to what the building already had rather than importing a signature Aman look from elsewhere. That restraint is the real subject of the restoration, more than any single object within it.

The dining rooms, spa and bar are fitted into the palazzo rather than built out from it, kept deliberately quiet so the architecture keeps the authority. A hotel this small can let a handful of rooms do all the talking, and Aman Venice spends that allowance on the building rather than on the amenities around it.

It has been called one of the finest heritage restorations in Italy, a large claim for a five hundred year old building on a canal lined with competing claims. The case for it is not any single intervention. It is the twenty four rooms that were not added, and the frescoes left exactly where they were painted, in a city where almost every other palazzo hotel has added at least one of the two.



Few hospitality brands are as immediately recognised, or as consistently trusted, for design-led properties shaped entirely by place. Aman Venice, which opened in 2013 as the brand's first Italian address, demonstrates why that reputation holds. Not one showpiece decision, but the accumulated discipline of leaving a five hundred year old building mostly alone.

Guests do not describe a single fitting or a signature colour. They describe a ceiling, a garden, a staircase, and a room count kept deliberately, stubbornly small.

The measure of the restoration is what a guest cannot see: the floor that was not levelled, the room count that was not increased, the ceiling that was never touched. Restraint like that is learned by watching what happens once someone else decides a building needs improving.

Aman Venice, Palazzo Papadopoli, Grand Canal, Venice. Interior design Jean-Michel Gathy, Denniston. 24 rooms. Built 1570 for the Coccina family, hotel since 2013.

<https://www.aman.com/>
Photography courtesy of Aman



Bab Al Shams

Dubai's first design-led desert resort, reopened in 2023 after a ten-month restoration that chose refinement over reinvention.



Bab Al Shams means gateway to the sun, and the name has outlasted most Dubai resort names. It opened in 2004 in the Al Marmoom desert, the emirate's first design-led desert resort and, twenty years on, still its longest running.

That is worth pausing on. Dubai in 2004 was building upward and outward at a pace that made most hospitality projects disposable by design, built for headlines rather than a quarter century of guests. A desert fort, forty minutes from anything, was the contrarian bet in a market chasing the tallest building and the newest island.

Longevity in Dubai hospitality is its own achievement, in a market that tends to demolish rather than renovate. Bab Al Shams closed in 2022 for a ten-month restoration under LW Design, reopening in February 2023 under Kerzner International's Rare Finds collection.

The brief was restoration, not reinvention. It did not gut the resort or chase a shinier idea of luxury. It restored what was already there, and the resort reads exactly that way.

Sixteen buildings, one village

The resort is laid out as sixteen two-storey buildings arranged like a fortified desert village, sand-toned plaster walls and timber beams standing in for the render and steel of the city half an hour north. Courtyards, archways and shaded alcoves break the plan into a labyrinth rather than a grid, so a guest walking to a room takes the winding route rather than a corridor.

That labyrinthine plan is a genuine piece of design thinking, not an atmospheric flourish. A fort's layout in this climate exists to break wind and cast shade at every turn, and the 2023 restoration kept the geometry rather than smoothing it into something easier to signpost.

Patterned stone floors and oversized mirrors carry the same vocabulary into the rooms themselves, and marble mosaic bathrooms do the quiet work of feeling ceremonial without tipping into spectacle. Nothing in the palette competes with the desert visible through every window; it is designed to be looked past as much as looked at.





The 115 rooms and five signature suites sit within that fortress plan, sized generously enough that the labyrinth reads as luxury rather than inconvenience, but the more interesting accommodation is the standalone one, set apart from the fort's own walls entirely and given a form the fort itself never uses anywhere across its own sixteen buildings, inside or out, and priced accordingly for guests who want the desert with nobody else's footprint anywhere near it.

A circular tent reimagined in stone

The Desert Pool Villas take their form from the Bedouin tent rather than the fort, circular rather than rectilinear, finished in walnut, alabaster, travertine and quartzite. Each has an open-air shower and clerestory windows set high, admitting light without a sightline in.

Each villa keeps its own plunge pool and stretch of dune beyond the wall, so the privacy the form implies outside is genuinely delivered inside.

It is the kind of accommodation that photographs as a folly and functions as a considered response to climate, privacy and a shape this landscape has built in for centuries, long before anyone called it a design reference. Tents work in a desert because a circle sheds wind and heat more evenly than a corner ever can, and the villas keep that logic even once translated into permanent, load-bearing stone. Nothing about the form is decorative; every curve does a job the corners of the fort cannot, and the materials were chosen to earn their keep in direct sun rather than simply look expensive.

Five kitchens for one desert

Al Hadheerah runs as an open-air spectacle with live entertainment. Zala is quieter, Mediterranean cooking in light-filled rooms. Ya Hala is a cigar lounge, the Pool Bar handles the casual hours, and Anwā, a rooftop lounge, is due to complete the roster and the resort's range in one move, adding height to a property that has otherwise stayed close to the ground on purpose.



The restoration carried a sustainability brief alongside the design one, and the two turned out to be less separate than a resort of this scale usually treats them. Furnishings were upcycled rather than replaced wholesale. Amenities are refillable. Natural ventilation and energy-efficient lighting were built into the renovation rather than bolted on afterward, decisions that show up nowhere in a brochure photograph but shape almost everything a guest actually experiences day to day, room by room, hour by hour, long after the opening party is forgotten.

Heritage and sustainability are not opposites but allies, and the old ways of building for the desert were low-impact long before anyone called them that. A thick plaster wall that keeps a room cool without air conditioning was not originally a sustainability feature. It was simply how you built in the desert before mechanical cooling existed, and the restoration's real achievement was resisting the urge to replace that older logic with a purely mechanical one, keeping both running side by side instead of letting one quietly retire the other altogether.

The palette follows the same logic: ochres, muted browns and sandy neutrals drawn straight from the dunes outside, lifted by the occasional deep teal or mustard accent rather than a full decorative departure from the landscape it sits inside and answers to at every turn.

A standalone spa building carries two hammams, five treatment rooms, a gym and a yoga deck, sized to feel like a discovery within the fort rather than an obvious wing bolted onto it. Guests find it by following a courtyard rather than a signposted corridor, which is the labyrinthine plan doing its job again, this time for wellness rather than accommodation.

None of it reads as a spa built to a template and dropped into a desert setting. It reads as a building that happens to contain a spa, which is a distinction the whole resort seems to insist on, room by room, right down to the smallest fitting and the last stretch of corridor.



The desert was always the real amenity

Al Marmoom Desert Conservation Reserve surrounds the resort, and the reserve is the reason Bab Al Shams can promise a genuine desert experience rather than a themed one built on borrowed sand. Al Qudra Lakes and the smaller Love Lake sit within reach, man-made wetlands that draw flamingos to a landscape most visitors assume holds nothing but dunes.

The activity list reads like a checklist for a different kind of holiday than the one most Dubai resorts sell: falconry, camel rides, pony treks, fat-bike tours across the dunes, guided desert drives timed either side of the heat. None of it needs the resort's architecture to work, which is worth noting, because it means the fort was never actually the main event.

What Bab Al Shams sells, and has sold since 2004, is proximity: a room inside a genuinely remote landscape without the compromises that usually come with genuine remoteness. The 2023 restoration did not change that equation. It made the architecture around it worth photographing on its own terms, which is a different achievement.

A conservation reserve surrounding a resort is not a common arrangement, and it limits the hotel almost as much as it helps it. Building further into protected desert was never an option here, so the sixteen buildings and villas beyond are close to this site's ceiling. Scarcity, again, doing useful work rather than marketing work.

That ceiling matters against a skyline that treats scarcity as a problem another tower can fix. Bab Al Shams sits inside a boundary it cannot cross, and the design makes peace with that limit.

The case for restoring rather than rebuilding is usually made in the abstract. Bab Al Shams makes it literally: twenty years on, still the longest running resort of its kind in the UAE, and busier now than when it opened.

Bab Al Shams Desert Resort and Spa, Al Marmoom Desert, Dubai. Restoration and interior design LW Design. Opened 2004, restored and reopened February 2023. 115 rooms and five signature suites, across sixteen buildings.

<https://www.babalshams.com/>
Photography by Natalee Cocks



Sir Prague

A neo-Renaissance apartment house on the Vltava, reworked by Linda Boronkay around a single idea: Cubist geometry set against Baroque romance.



Sir Prague occupies a five storey corner block on Náplavní, a three minute walk inland from the Dancing House, in a building whose architect is still formally disputed. Emanuel Poche credited Josef Schulz in 1985. Jindřich Noll and Jindřich Vybíral questioned that attribution in 1994. No one has settled it since, and the hotel makes no attempt to settle it either.

What is settled is the building itself: built in 1882 to 1884 as a činžovní dům, a speculative rental apartment house, by the builder Vratislav Pasovský, with an entrance sculpture by Josef Maudr and ground floor alterations by Osvald Polívka in 1921 and 1928. It is a protected cultural monument, and for roughly twenty five years before Sir arrived it traded as the Eurostars David hotel.

Linda Boronkay took the commission with her London studio, founded in September 2020 after she left her post as design director at Soho House, where she oversaw more than twenty projects across several continents. The studio is small, seventeen people across eight countries, an unusual scale for a project of this ambition, and it is telling that she chose a reference movement rather than a mood.

A movement two years too early for its own city

That reference is Czech Cubism, the movement that ran from around 1911 into the early 1920s, when a group of Prague artists took Cubist geometry, at that point a two dimensional painting idea, and built it into facades, furniture and staircases. Josef Gočár's House of the Black Madonna, from 1912, is the movement's best known landmark, and Josef Chochol's apartment buildings sit a short walk south along the embankment.

It was the contrasts that inspired us, the tension between sharp Cubist geometry and soft Baroque romanticism, is how Boronkay has described the brief. Cubism is angular and analytical. The building underneath it, stuccoed ceilings and stone facades, is a nineteenth century read of the classical. Sir Prague stages the argument between them rather than resolving it.

We honoured the heritage architecture of Prague by preserving the stonework, ironmongery and soaring ceilings, she has said, and created moments of surprise that didn't compete with the past but rather conversed with it.





A library for residents, a courtyard for summer

The Library, fitted with Murano chandeliers and velvet cocktail chairs alongside vintage ceramics, is reserved for residents rather than the public, a deliberate scarcity in a hotel built around a curated art programme overseen by Karina Kottová, formerly of Museum Kampa, DOX and MeetFactory. The original 1882 courtyard runs as a seasonal bar, open to anyone.

Guest rooms carry hand-selected vintage Czech furniture, hand-embroidered headboards and hand-painted Cubist panels, a decorative programme specific enough that it could not be bought from a supplier catalogue. The palette runs burgundy, muted ochre and sapphire, drawn from the city's roofs, parks and the Vltava, worked in velvet, aged leather, polished metal and natural stone.

Seven North, the restaurant, is the Prague outpost of Israeli chef Eyal Shani, of Miznon and HaSalon, and opened on 4 June 2025, under three months after the hotel itself. Woven leather chairs, spice hues and chequerboard parquet set a warmer register than the Library's, and it keeps its own hours, closed Sundays.

Sir Prague belongs to Sircle Collection, the Amsterdam operator founded by Liran Wizman, whose Sir brand launched in 2013 with Sir Albert, set inside a former diamond factory. The lineage matters: every Sir hotel picks a building with a specific, arguable history and asks a designer to make an explicit case about it, rather than softening it.

Seventy six rooms and suites, five floors, one tower apartment. The count is modest by the standards of the international groups building nearby, and that scale is itself part of the argument: a Cubist facade and a Baroque ceiling can only be reconciled room by room, not at template scale.

Sir Prague, Náplavní 1618/6, Prague 2. Interior design Linda Boronkay Design Studio, London. Art curation Karina Kottová. Restaurant Seven North, chef Eyal Shani. Operator Sircle Collection. Building 1882 to 1884, hotel opened 17 March 2025, seventy six rooms across five floors.

<https://www.sirhotels.com/en/prague/>
Photography by Steve Herud, Martin Morrell, Ben Anders and Jana Křenová



Stradom House, Kraków

A fourteenth century monastery between Wawel Castle and Kazimierz, restored over ten years by ADC Atelier into something that argues with none of its own history.



Stradom House sits on ground built on since the fourteenth century, during the reign of King Casimir the Great, and has done more work in that time than most hotels claim in a hundred years. It has been a monastery, a hospital and a military command headquarters, in that order, before Angel Poland Group acquired the building in 2013 and began a restoration that ran for more than a decade before completion, one of the longer hotel restorations attempted anywhere in the city.

That timeline matters more than the room count. A building asked to be three entirely different institutions across seven centuries has already survived the kind of change a hotel renovation usually treats as drama. Architects, archaeologists and conservators worked the site together, the correct order of operations for a building this old and this layered, and the reason the restoration took as long as it did.

Neither replicated nor rejected

ADC Atelier, the London studio behind the interiors, has described its own approach carefully: the design neither replicates the past nor rejects it. It settles somewhere between the two, aiming for a hotel that feels both timeless and distinctly of the present at once, rather than picking a single decade of the building's history to belong to.

The lobby is where that brief is easiest to see. Vaulted ceilings meet contemporary furnishings without either side being asked to apologise for the other. Raw stone walls pair with soft upholstery. Lighting brings out texture rather than staging a spectacle, a restrained choice for a building with this much drama already built into its fabric before a single designer arrived on site to begin the long work of putting it back together.





A dome that has outlived every use of the room

The ground floor's grandest room keeps its original vaulted dome and ironwork intact, the one piece of the building too striking for any of its three institutional lives, monastery, hospital, military headquarters, to alter. It now works as a bar, furnished with contemporary pieces chosen not to compete with the architecture above them.

That is the “neither replicates nor rejects” brief from ADC Atelier made physical: the dome does the talking, and the furniture is content to listen. Pendant lighting is angled to pick out the ribs of the vault rather than light the room evenly, the same restraint that runs through the hotel.

The counter itself is kept low and unfussy, close enough in material to the surrounding stone that it reads as part of the room rather than a fitting dropped into it.

The corridors do the quieter work

Away from the grand rooms, corridors link the public spaces to the 125 guest rooms with less fanfare but the same logic: raw stone where offered, soft upholstery where comfort needs it, lighting kept low enough to read as period rather than renovated.

A number of rooms keep a run of exposed vaulting of their own, a quieter echo of the dome downstairs, so the building's oldest surfaces are not confined to the spaces guests only pass through once on the way to somewhere grander. Furnishings stay close to the lobby's palette: timber, muted stone tones, soft textiles rather than pattern for its own sake.

It is an unshowy way to treat rooms this old, letting the architecture carry the drama rather than the furniture. That same restraint carries through to where guests eat, and the hotel's three restaurants pick up the argument from here.







A suite at the summit, and what surrounds it

The result, 125 rooms and suites under the Autograph Collection banner, opened in 2023 on a plot most Kraków visitors walk straight past on the way between two more famous addresses: Wawel Royal Castle to one side, Kazimierz, the former Jewish quarter and now the city's creative district, to the other.

The Chapel Loft is the hotel's singular accommodation, set at the building's summit, and it is built on drama rather than furnishing: volume and light define the room more than any single object placed inside it. A hotel with 125 keys can usually only afford one gesture this pure, and Stradom House has spent it on the room with the least competition from the fabric around it.

Curated contemporary art by Polish and international artists runs through the public spaces, layered in rather than hung as a finishing touch. A vaulted monastery ceiling and a piece of contemporary Polish sculpture share a room without either being asked to defer to the other.

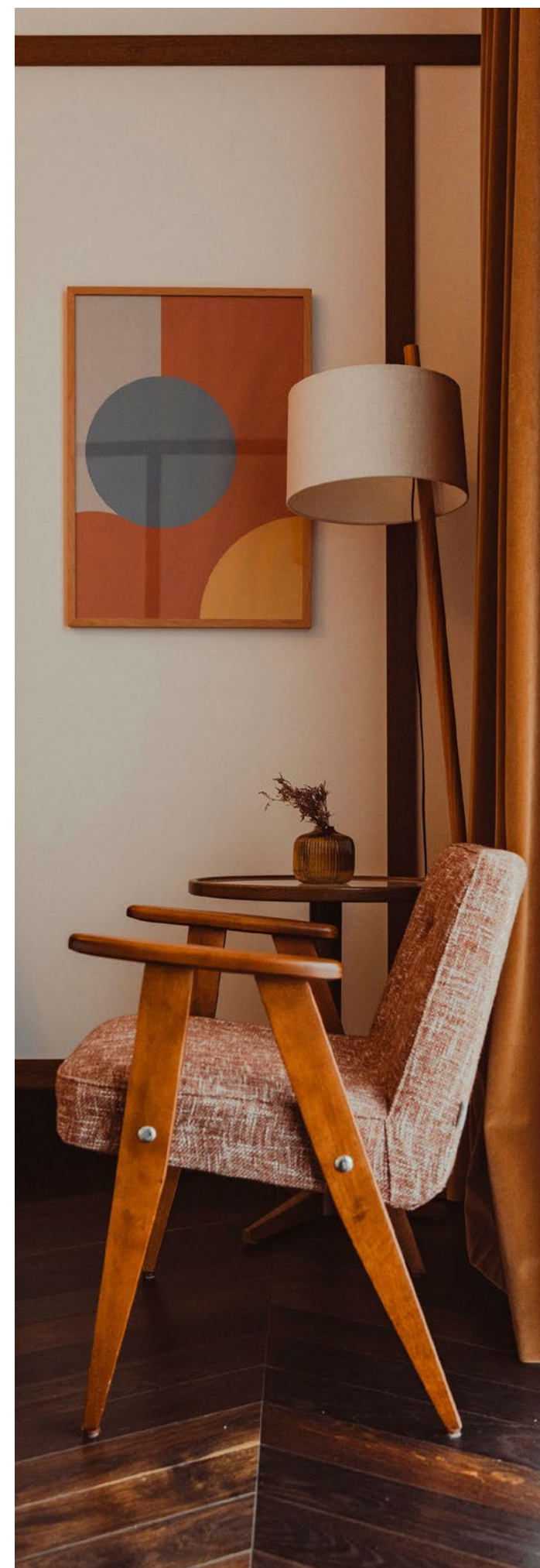
The location does real work too. Wawel Royal Castle sits on one side, the medieval seat of Polish kings the reason most visitors come this way at all. Kazimierz sits on the other, the former Jewish quarter turned creative district, thick with the galleries, bars and studios that now define Kraków's contemporary identity as much as its royal history does.

Stradom House occupies the gap between those two identities without pretending to resolve it, which is consistent with everything else about the building: a monastery, a hospital and a military headquarters, restored to let seven centuries of use stay visible rather than sanded into one clean story.

The case for a decade long restoration is rarely made in numbers, because the numbers alone would argue against it. It is made in a building that still reads as what it always was, several things at once, kept rather than replaced.

Stradom House, Kraków. Interior design ADC Atelier, London. Operator Autograph Collection by Marriott. Developer Angel Poland Group, acquired 2013. 125 rooms and suites, opened 2023.

<https://stradomhouse.com/>
Photography courtesy of Stradom House



Hôtel Borsari

A former winery in Martigny, on ground the Romans built a provincial capital on, reworked by John Cretton and Shaun Evans into a hotel with almost nothing digital about it.

Martigny is not a name most people can place, which is exactly the point Hôtel Borsari is built to make. The Swiss town sits at the foot of the Great St Bernard Pass, thirty three kilometres south of Montreux, and it has been a genuinely important place for roughly two thousand years, just not recently.

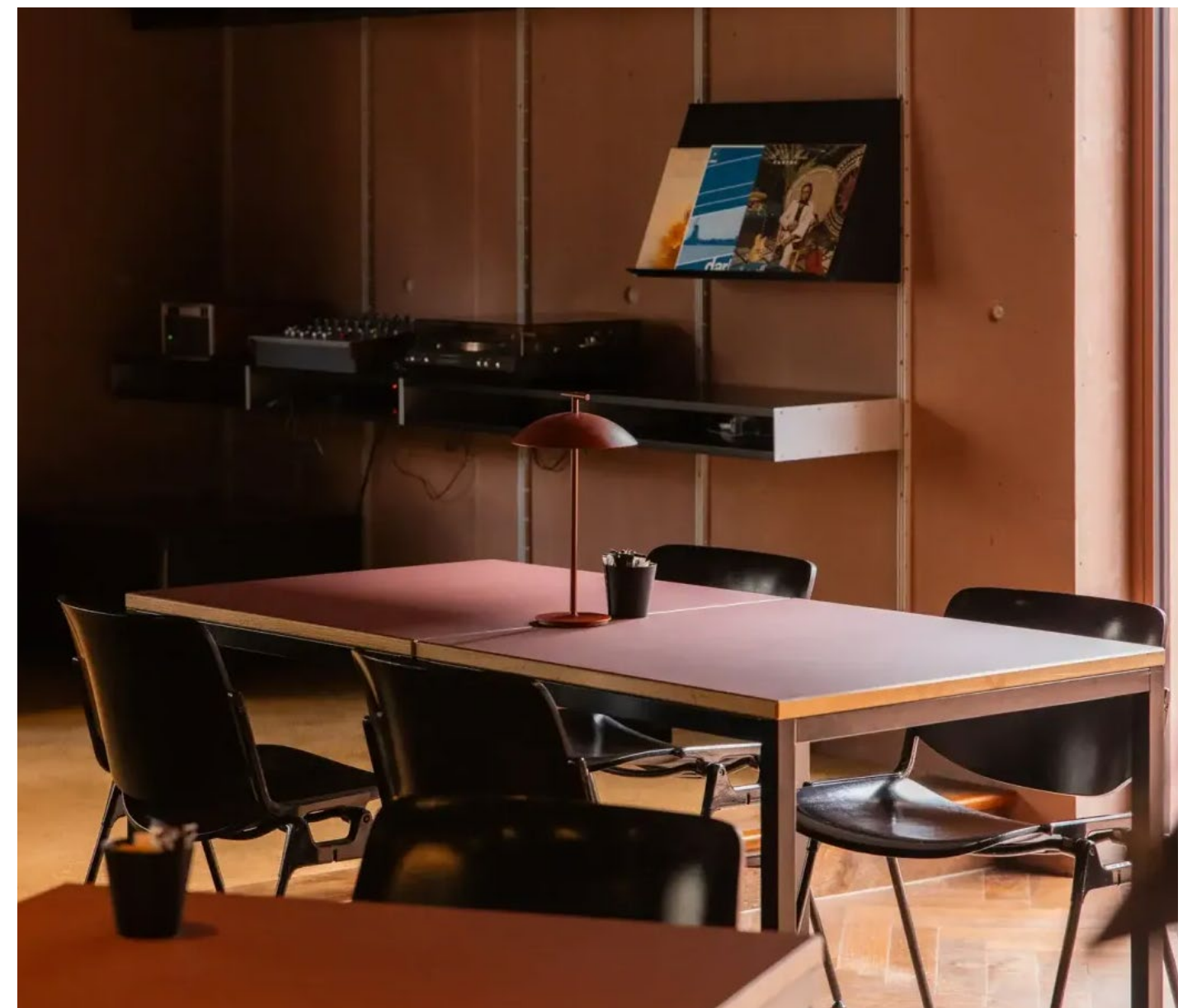
The Romans knew it as Forum Claudii Vallensium, a provincial capital established between AD 41 and 47, complete with an amphitheatre, temples and thermal baths, built at a crossing point that controlled trade over the Alps. Martigny's importance was never a matter of scenery. It was a matter of geography, and the geography has not changed.

Hôtel Borsari occupies the former Les Caves Orsat, a winery and agro-industrial complex left disused on that same ground, opened in April 2025 by John Cretton, a classics graduate turned owner, working with Shaun Evans as Drip and Drip.

Analogue, not digital

That is Cretton's own phrase for the operating philosophy, and it is meant literally rather than as marketing shorthand: everything you need and nothing more. Forty two rooms, sized between twenty and thirty five square metres, and eight suites at thirty six to forty four, none of them stuffed with the screens and gadgetry a new hotel usually leads with.

We hark back to an era that doesn't exist, Cretton has said, but we're far from pastiche, which is the harder trick: a hotel that feels historically grounded without ever pretending to be a museum piece or a reconstruction. Martigny's own layered history, Roman fort, wine complex, hotel, gave the studio a genuine precedent to work from rather than an invented one. The philosophy carries into the rooms too: no in-room tablets, no charging hub bristling with cables, restraint rather than deprivation.





Roman bricks, made the Roman way

The construction leans on handmade brick and lime render, produced using brick making techniques that trace back to the Roman provincial capital the hotel now sits on top of. That is a specific, researched decision rather than a decorative gesture toward the past: the material logic is inherited, not just the address.

Raw and stained concrete throughout the building echoes the original wine tanks, the borsaris the hotel takes its name from, so the industrial memory of the site is kept legible in the fabric rather than erased by the conversion. Larch wood windows, oak parquet and coir matting carry the material register into the guest rooms. The lime render itself is left with a slightly uneven, hand-worked finish, closer to the site's original agro-industrial fabric than to a conventional new-build render.

Bathrooms are finished in black and cream terrazzo, and the guest floors are colour coded by theme rather than by number: forest green for foliage, crushed grape red for the site's wine history, basalt black for stone and mineral, alpine lake blue for the Mont Blanc spring water that eventually reaches the taps.

Furnishing runs almost entirely to Dieter Rams objects, Vitsoe shelving, 620 seating, Braun audio units, alongside vintage European pieces, Artemide Tolomeo lighting and fixtures by Davide Groppi. It is a specific, arguable set of references rather than a generic luxury palette, and it holds the analogue premise together in the rooms as much as the concrete does in the structure. The result reads as considered rather than curated for effect, objects chosen because they still work, not because they photograph well, the same argument the concrete and brickwork are already making elsewhere in the building, room after room.

Two thousand square metres, no phones

Les Bains Publics, the hotel's underground thermal bathing complex, runs to 2,000 square metres, capped at thirty guests at a time, and phones and wifi are excluded from the space entirely, a rule enforced by architecture as much as by policy.

The circuit follows Roman bathing sequence rather than a spa menu: hot and cold pools in order, steam rooms cut into the old cellars, and a plunge pool set beneath the winery's former loading bay, left as bare concrete.

A public bath at Roman scale, on a site that once had its own thermal baths under Claudius, is not a coincidence dressed up as a wellness amenity. It is the clearest single expression of the hotel's whole argument: that Martigny's Roman inheritance is a design brief, not a footnote for the guidebook.

The comparison holds structurally as well as thematically. A Roman bath was civic infrastructure built at a scale ordinary buildings could not match, and Les Bains Publics borrows that logic rather than the decoration, using sheer scale itself as the argument for calm.

Three kitchens, three cities away

Le Cercle is the main restaurant, led by chef Matteo Salas, formerly of Àperi in Mexico, with a kitchen that draws explicitly on Lyon, Milan and Zürich, each roughly 180 kilometres from Martigny and each a genuine culinary reference point rather than a marketing flourish.

La Saucithèque is the Valais wine bar, built around the canton's own producers, and Alphonse handles coffee and juice either side of a meal. Three venues inside forty two rooms is a generous spread.

None of it depends on Martigny being a well known name, which is fortunate, because it mostly is not. The hotel's bet is that a genuinely researched sense of place, Roman brickwork, a Roman bathing complex, a wine history kept visible in raw concrete, outlasts novelty, a wager on substance made before the name meant anything to today's guests.

Hôtel Borsari, Martigny, Valais. Owner and design John Cretton with Shaun Evans, Drip and Drip. Site former Les Caves Orsat winery. 42 rooms, 8 suites. Member, Design Hotels. Opened April 2025.
<https://www.hotelborsari.com/>



Shelborne by Proper

On Collins Avenue, Igor Plevitzky's 1941 Art Deco tower returns as Shelborne by Proper, its Morris Lapidus pool deck intact and its rooms remade by ADC Atelier around the hotel's own history.



Collins Avenue has no shortage of hotels claiming a design pedigree, but the Shelborne can point to two of them. Igor Plevitzky and Thomas Triplett Russell raised the tower in 1941, one of the addresses that gave Miami Beach its Art Deco identity: bold geometric massing, a two storey glass fronted lobby, and the streamlined confidence that still reads as modern eight decades on.

Plevitzky went on to become one of the region's defining Modernist architects, and the Shelborne shows the instincts early: the building was designed to maximise oceanfront views rather than street presence, turning the beach itself into the facade's real subject.

Seventeen years later, Morris Lapidus arrived with a different brief. His 1958 expansion added an L-shaped tower, a circular porte-cochere and private cabanas, but the signature move was the pool deck: a diving platform raised on slim white piers, theatrical rather than merely functional, reopened with artificial snow trucked in for the party. Guests still ask staff whether that story is true. It is.

That pairing, Plevitzky's restraint under Lapidus's showmanship, is the architectural argument the hotel has always made, and it is the one ADC Atelier inherited rather than invented when Proper Hospitality brought them in for a hundred million dollar renovation completed in 2024. The studio's brief was continuity, not reinvention.

Two architects, one skyline

Lapidus is remembered for Miami Modernism's swagger, the sweeping curves and theatrical flourish now shorthand for MiMo. Plevitzky's contribution reads quieter today, which is precisely why the Shelborne matters: it is one of the few addresses where his geometry and Lapidus's spectacle sit on the same block, each still legible against the other.

The rooftop lettering, raised the year the hotel opened, remains one of Miami Beach's most photographed signatures. Guests see it from the sand well before they reach the porte-cochere.





A stage for Sinatra and Monroe

Miami Beach's golden age, roughly the nineteen sixties through the eighties, ran straight through the Shelborne's pool deck. Frank Sinatra, Marilyn Monroe and the Beatles all passed through, drawn by the same combination Lapidus had built for: a stage disguised as a swimming pool, cabanas as green rooms.

The hotel does not chase that past so much as let a guest sit inside it, cocktail in hand, under the same diving platform.

What ADC Atelier changed, and what it kept

The renovation's material palette runs honed Perlino marble, travertine and vintage inflected glass against soft moss green, terracotta and powder blue, a warmer register than Art Deco's original chrome and white but pitched to sit comfortably beside it rather than argue with it.

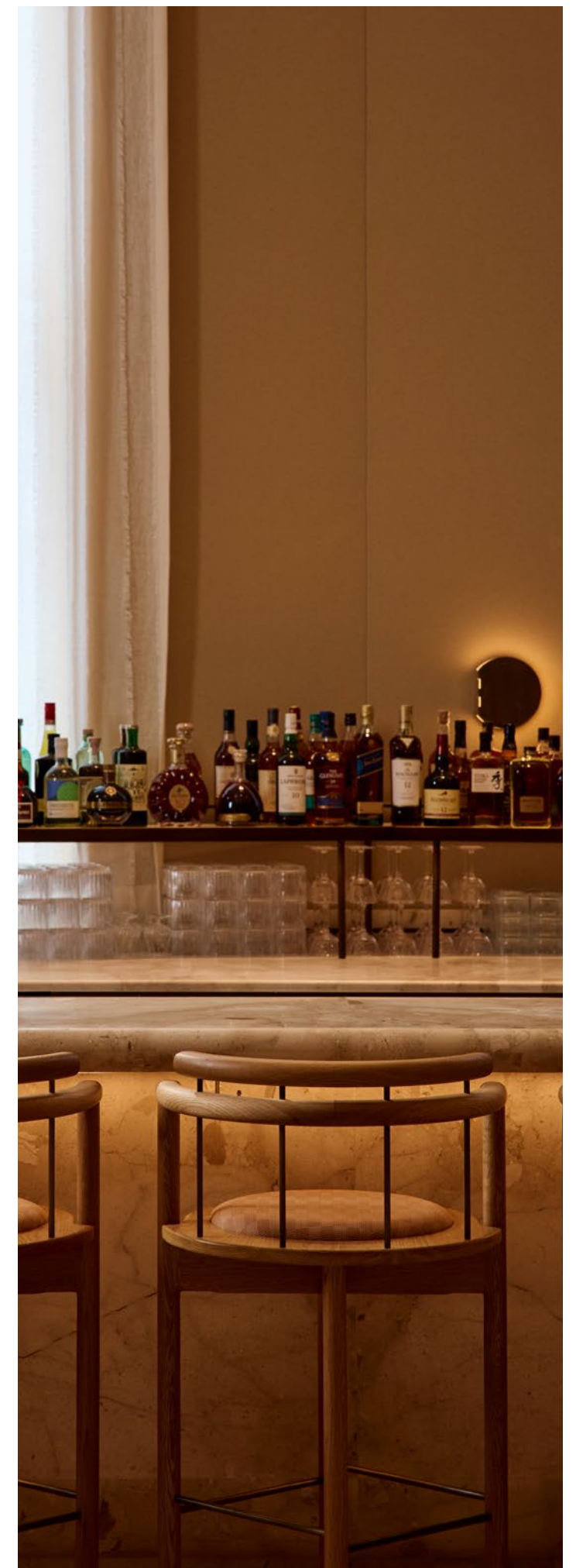
Furnishing is specified rather than generic: upholstery from Larsen Fabrics, Arflex's Edo sofa, rugs by Cotlin Raw, Respire wall sconces from DCW Editions and vintage inflected lounge chairs by Royal Stranger. Brian De Lowe, Proper Hospitality's co-founder, has described the intent as breathing fresh life into a Miami icon by pairing timeless design with a contemporary spirit, a brief that shows most clearly in the choice to keep Lapidus's pool deck untouched while remaking almost everything around it.

Two hundred and fifty one rooms, one art programme

The 251 guest rooms and 32 suites and villas span a range that includes a 1,700 square foot two bedroom penthouse with Atlantic views, a two bedroom terrace suite, and two bedroom pool villas with their own kitchenettes, a spread that lets the hotel work equally for a weekend and a longer stay.

Art runs through the public rooms as a specified programme rather than decoration bought by the metre: hand dyed silk installations by Kenny Nguyen, fabricated works by Regina Jestrow, sculpture by Lauren Shapiro, handwoven topographic views of Miami by Jessy Nite, palm inspired paintings by Hayley Moree, ceramic vases by Carly Graceffa and ceramic bowls by the Barcelona artisan Clara Arbunies. Seven named makers across a single hotel is an unusually deep commission for the category, and it reads as an argument that the art belongs to the building rather than to a supplier catalogue.

The penthouse carries the argument furthest: seventeen hundred square feet, two bedrooms, an Atlantic facing terrace, and the same material vocabulary as a standard room scaled up rather than swapped out, so the largest suite in the building still reads as the same hotel. The two bedroom pool villas go further still, each with its own kitchenette and direct access to the deck.





Five kitchens, one waterline

Chef Abram Bissell, previously of Eleven Madison Park, leads five venues with beverage director Christopher Lowder: Pauline, the lounge Little Torch, an all day cafe, a bar and a beach club.

Pauline seats a hundred and seventy eight, indoors and on a terrace looking over the pool, in a room by ADC Tuneu built on porthole windows, bespoke stone and oceanic tones. The kitchen runs Caribbean Latino, seafood forward and specific: jonah crab claws and conch ceviche from the raw bar, a lobster and mussel sancocho, turbot encendido, yuca cremosa with rosemary tostones.

A Design Hotels member, not a chain link

Shelborne by Proper carries Design Hotels affiliation rather than a conventional flag, a curated list rather than an open one.

Proper Hospitality treats the building as the primary asset rather than a shell for a template interior.

None of it depends on a guest already knowing Polevitzky's name or Lapidus's. The rooftop sign does that work for free, visible from the sand, and it has been doing it since 1941.

What the renovation adds is a reason to look past the sign once you are inside: a hotel that treats its own two architectural inheritances, one restrained, one theatrical, as a brief still worth building from rather than a history to be tidied away.

Sinatra would still recognise the pool deck. That the room built for him in 1958 is the one thing ADC Atelier chose not to touch says plainly which parts of this history were judged worth keeping.

Shelborne by Proper, 1801 Collins Avenue, Miami Beach. Architecture Igor Polevitzky and Thomas Triplett Russell, 1941. Pool deck Morris Lapidus, 1958. Interior design ADC Atelier. 251 rooms, 32 suites and villas. Renovation completed 2024.

<https://shelborne.com/>

Photography courtesy of Proper Hospitality





HOSHINOYA Tokyo

Rie Azuma avoids new materials, choosing surfaces that improve with age rather than wear out. HOSHINOYA Tokyo opened in July 2016, giving her a decade to prove the theory before anyone else could.

Rie Azuma has one rule she applies before any other. I try not to choose new materials, she has said. I want materials where you feel texture, where time creates better taste rather than deterioration. HOSHINOYA Tokyo, her ryokan built into an Otemachi office tower, opened in July 2016 as the fullest test of that rule available: eighty four rooms and ten years now on the clock.

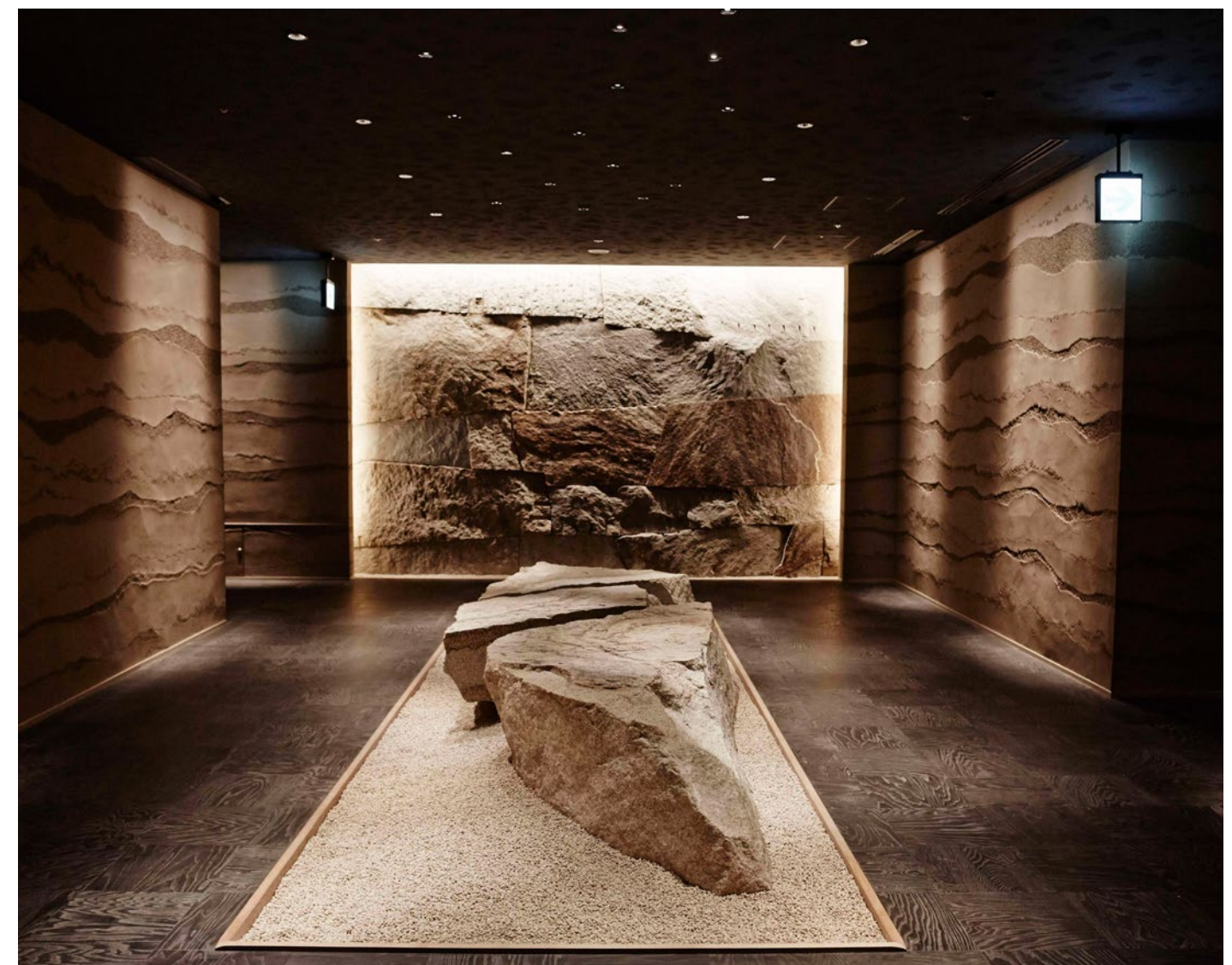
The flooring makes the argument before a guest reaches their room. Borderless Ryukyu format tatami runs continuously from the entrance through the corridors, into the lift cars and on into the rooms, a single material treated as structure rather than a finish that stops at a threshold.

Bathrooms are the one exception to Azuma's rule, enclosed in electrochromic switchable glass rather than a material chosen to age. It is, by her own logic, the only element in the room built to be replaced rather than to improve, and she has been direct that it is the one thing that will eventually need throwing away.

A decade with no renovation

Ten years on, HOSHINOYA Tokyo has not announced a guest room renovation, the ordinary fate of any hotel interior on roughly that cycle. Room rates have moved instead, from seventy eight thousand yen at opening to around a hundred and eighty two thousand now, which is one way of reading whether the material bet paid off.

Guest rooms carry chestnut framed shoji in place of curtains, custom furniture built on feet designed to distribute weight and protect the tatami beneath it, and andon derived lighting worked in Edo komon patterning. Beds are set low, on a platform, built to a height calibrated for Western guests rather than a traditional ryokan floor level, a small concession inside a building otherwise built on continuity. Rooms come in three sizes, Kiku at eighty square metres, Yuri and Sakura at forty five each, so the same material logic scales from the smallest room to the largest without changing register.





Water from fifteen hundred metres down

The seventeenth floor bathing areas run a granite lined pool by the stoneworker Izumiya Sekizai, cypress wall panelling, and Otemachi Onsen water, a fossil seawater drawn from fifteen hundred metres below the tower, an iodine bearing sodium chloride spring strong enough to qualify as a genuine onsen in the middle of Tokyo's financial district, reached by lift without leaving the building. In room tubs are cast in black artificial marble rather than the hinoki a ryokan guest might expect, a rare manufacturer specified departure.

A restaurant below street level

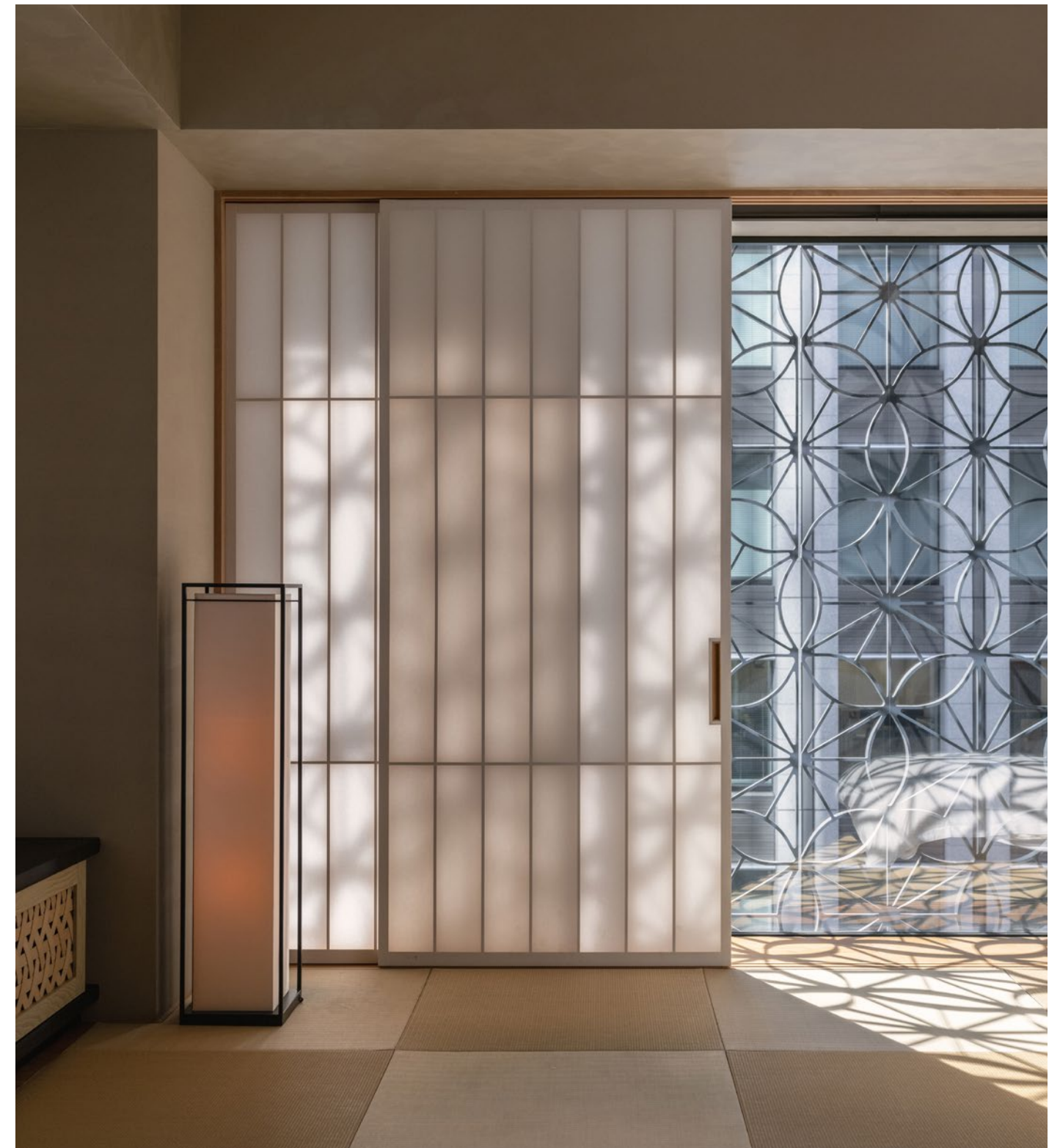
The restaurant sits below grade, behind a granite feature wall and plasterwork mixed with compressed earth, hand laid by a master plasterer. Extra wide chestnut boarding runs the floor, and six private tatami rooms sit alongside four table settings, lit by hand cut Edo kiriko glass from Hanashyo.

Sushi Otemon, an eight seat counter added in March 2025, is run by chef Masaru Nishimura and serves Edomae alongside regional styles, including Wakayama's mehari zushi, rice wrapped in pickled mustard greens rather than nori, open to guests not staying in the hotel.

The trades behind the finish, and ten years of trophies

Azuma Architect and Associates handled the ryokan planning and interiors, working with Mitsubishi Jisho Sekkei and NTT Facilities as architects of record and Toda Corporation as contractor. Woodwork is by Hinoki Kogei, stonework by Izumiya Sekizai, lighting by Illumination of City Environment, landscape by Hiroki Hasegawa of Studio On Site with the Kyoto firm Ueyakato, founded in 1848. Kimono designer Jotaro Saito specified the staff room wear, and installations include glass by Toshio Iezumi and ceramics by Kozo Takeuchi and Masaru Kikichi.

The awards arrived on their own schedule rather than at launch: AHEAD's Urban Hotel and Global New Concept prizes in 2019, place thirty nine in the World's 50 Best Hotels in 2023, and a Condé Nast Traveler Triple Crown in 2026, a decade after the first tatami was laid. Ten years without a guest room renovation is the harder achievement, the one Azuma would call the real test.



A kitchen that keeps changing hands

Noriyuki Hamada, third place at the Bocuse d'Or in 2013, opened the kitchen in 2016. Ryosuke Oka has led it since May 2023, rebuilding the dinner menu in September 2025 around Japanese home dishes worked through French technique, the kitchen's one deliberate break from continuity.

Breakfast runs Japanese or Western, and room service operates around the clock, unreserved.

Azuma prefers nature's randomness to any material. A decade on, tatami and granite still do their job.

HOSHINOYA Tokyo, 1 Otemachi, Chiyoda, Tokyo. Interiors Rie Azuma, Azuma Architect and Associates. Architects of record Mitsubishi Jisho Sekkei, NTT Facilities. Eighty four rooms. Opened July 2016.

<https://hoshinoresorts.com/en/hotels/hoshinoyato-kyo/>
Photography courtesy of Hoshino Resorts

OKU Kos

Mastrominas ARChitecture broke one main building into four freestanding volumes around a square, rendered in plaster laid the Leros way.



Most hotels build one main building and work outward from it. OKU Kos took the opposite decision. Mastrominas ARChitecture, the Kos based practice Ilias Mastrominas founded in 1984, deconstructed the main building into four separate volumes arranged around a square, reception, management, bar and library each standing as its own structure, set apart by gardens and patios rather than gathered under one roof.

Micromega Architecture and Strategies handled the preliminary design that set that principle in motion, a plan where a guest crosses open ground between every function, the garden doing the work a corridor would normally do.

The hotel opened in summer 2017 as Casa Cook Kos, built between January and June that year on a 29,080 square metre site in Marmari, and was rebranded OKU in 2019 after Thomas Cook's collapse, the concept and the four buildings carrying over intact under the new name.

The plaster is the detail worth stopping for. Every wall across the four volumes is finished in a rough plaster technique specific to the island of Leros, and rather than approximate it from a photograph, the architects brought a plasterer over from Leros to train the site's own workers in the method directly, a piece of imported craft knowledge that is rarely credited by name.

The rest of the material list stays local and specific: dry-stone walls in the island's own tradition, roof coverings worked as modern variants of a Kos original, polished concrete and timber through the public spaces, dove grey tadelakt inside the hammam and a textured thatch roof at the beach club.

Stefanos Karpouzis served as structural engineer for the four volume plan, with Stirixis Techniki S.A. as main contractor, turning the deconstructed brief into a buildable one across a six month site programme. The whole plan went from foundation to opening inside a single Aegean summer season.



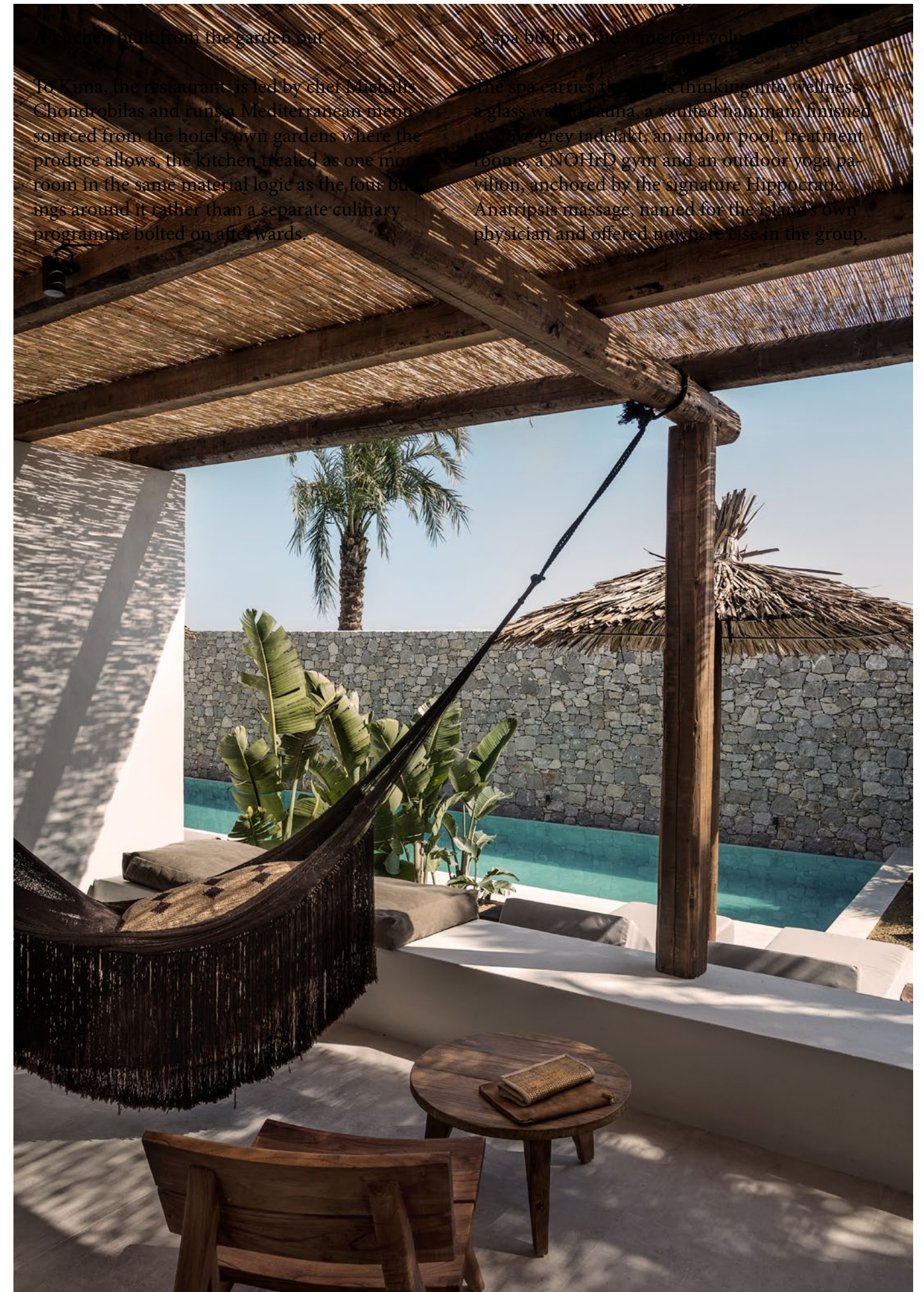
A name that arrived after the plan

Lambs and Lions, the Berlin studio behind the interiors, concept and branding, worked under creative director Michael Schickinger, with Annabell Kutucu on interior styling and Stefan Grüner on art direction.

The name oku borrows from Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki's 1979 writing on spatial depth, built from layered thresholds rather than one climactic room. The plan was fixed roughly three years before the name was chosen, so the hotel found the principle on its own first. A rare case of the plan outrunning its own theory.

The finished resort holds a hundred rooms, suites and villas across 5,771 square metres of built space, adults only from age sixteen and open April to November each year, a seasonal rhythm built into the Aegean site from the start rather than added later.

Marmari itself gave the project room the centre of Kos could not: space enough to break a hotel into four buildings and still leave gardens and patios between them, a plan that a denser plot closer to Kos Town would have forced back into a single block regardless of what the architects wanted. The choice cost the architects a longer build, but bought every guest a walk through a garden instead of a hallway.



A kitchen built from the garden out

To Kima, the restaurant, is led by chef Michalis Chondrobilas and runs a Mediterranean menu sourced from the hotel's own gardens where the produce allows, the kitchen treated as one more room in the same material logic as the four buildings around it rather than a separate culinary programme bolted on afterwards.

A spa built on the same four-volume logic

The spa carries the hotel's thinking into wellness: a glass-walled sauna, a vaulted hammam finished in dove grey tadelakt, an indoor pool, treatment rooms, a NOHRD gym and an outdoor yoga pavilion, anchored by the signature Hippocratic Anatripsiis massage, named for the island's own physician and offered nowhere else in the group.

One idea, four hotels and counting

OKU now operates in Ibiza, Andalusia and Bodrum alongside Kos, under Westfort Capital with the Belgian investor Marc Coucke, and the group has signalled further expansion toward African safari lodges and Indian Ocean resorts, each a new test of whether a plan built for one Aegean hillside travels to a savannah or an atoll, and whether the Leros habit of importing a single named craft holds up once the group is building somewhere that has no equivalent island next door.

None of it depends on a guest recognising Maki's name or the theory behind it. Walking between four separate buildings to find the bar, then the library, then reception, does the explaining on its own, patios and gardens standing in for the corridors a single building would have used instead.

The plaster carries the same argument in material form: a technique specific to one small Dodecanese island, brought physically across the water rather than approximated from a photograph, so that the walls are not simply the colour of Leros but built by its own method.

OKU Kos treats depth as the whole brief: four buildings, garden instead of corridor, a plan that found its name three years late.

OKU Kos, Marmari, Kos. Architecture Mastrominas ARChitecture, preliminary design Micromega Architecture and Strategies. Interiors, concept and branding Lambs and Lions, Berlin. Structural engineer Stefanos Karpouzis. 100 rooms, suites and villas. Opened summer 2017.

<https://okuhotels.com/oku-kos/>

Photography Georg Roske, George Fakaros and Brechenmacher & Baumann



The Londoner

Yabu Pushelberg took a 1930s theatre site as the brief, casting the bars and restaurants of Woods Bagot's sixteen-storey hotel as characters in a production.



The Londoner opened at 38 Leicester Square in September 2021, ten years after Edwardian Hotels London bought the site, calling itself the first super boutique hotel: a five star property built at landmark scale but run with the attention of a much smaller one.

Yabu Pushelberg, the New York and Toronto studio run by George Yabu and Glenn Pushelberg, designed the hotel as a production rather than a building, giving every public room a role. Pushelberg describes it as an homage to performance, each space representing someone essential to bringing a production to life, from the scriptwriter's dining room to the sound mixer's basement bar.

Yabu adds that seduction was the design device used to draw people through a hotel he calls giant, breaking public spaces into smaller interconnected rooms so the drama unfolds gradually rather than all at once, one room revealing the next like a set change.

Six rooms, six characters

Whitcomb's, the all day dining room, plays the scriptwriter, its walls hung with black and white portraits. Joshua's Tavern takes the gripsman's part, copper canisters and leather under a portrait in the manner of Joshua Reynolds. Eight floors up, 8 at The Londoner casts the performer, a rope installation modelled on the human body above a rooftop bar and terrace.

The Residence, reserved for guests, holds a drawing room, a Y Bar and a whisky room. In the basement, the Green Room turns undulating walls into a study of sound waves and tops its bar with megaphones cast in gold for the sound mixer.

Bronze stairs, mirrored ceilings and marble floors carry the theatre through every level, alongside four hundred artworks, among them pieces by Antony Gormley and Idris Khan, and a chandelier cast by Lasvit to Yabu Pushelberg's own design, the one prop every guest takes home in a photograph.



A site that was already a stage

The theatricality is not only decoration. The building at 38 Leicester Square was raised as a stage theatre in 1930, converted by Odeon in 1946, reduced to a single screen in 1968 and renamed the Odeon West End in 1988, before Edwardian Hotels London bought the site in 2011. Woods Bagot spent a decade turning it into a hotel that casts its own past as its concept, a continuity most guests never learn.

Sixteen storeys, eight of them underground

The hotel rises sixteen storeys, only eight of them above ground. Arup's engineers sank piling thirty metres down to support a basement graded habitable across six levels, among the deepest of its kind in London. Two Odeon cinema screens sit inside an isolated box within it, soundproofed against the trains and the city above.

A tilemaking tradition, redrawn

The blue terracotta reveals wrapping the tower come from a competition the painter and sculptor Ian Monroe won, referencing Leicester Square's own history as a centre for tilemaking. Woods Bagot modelled his geometric patterns in Rhino, breaking them into thirty separate designs with their own installation instructions, before a terracotta manufacturer's artisans cast, dried, painted and fired each of the more than fifteen thousand tiles by hand, a six week process for every one.

Underneath the theatre, a quieter argument

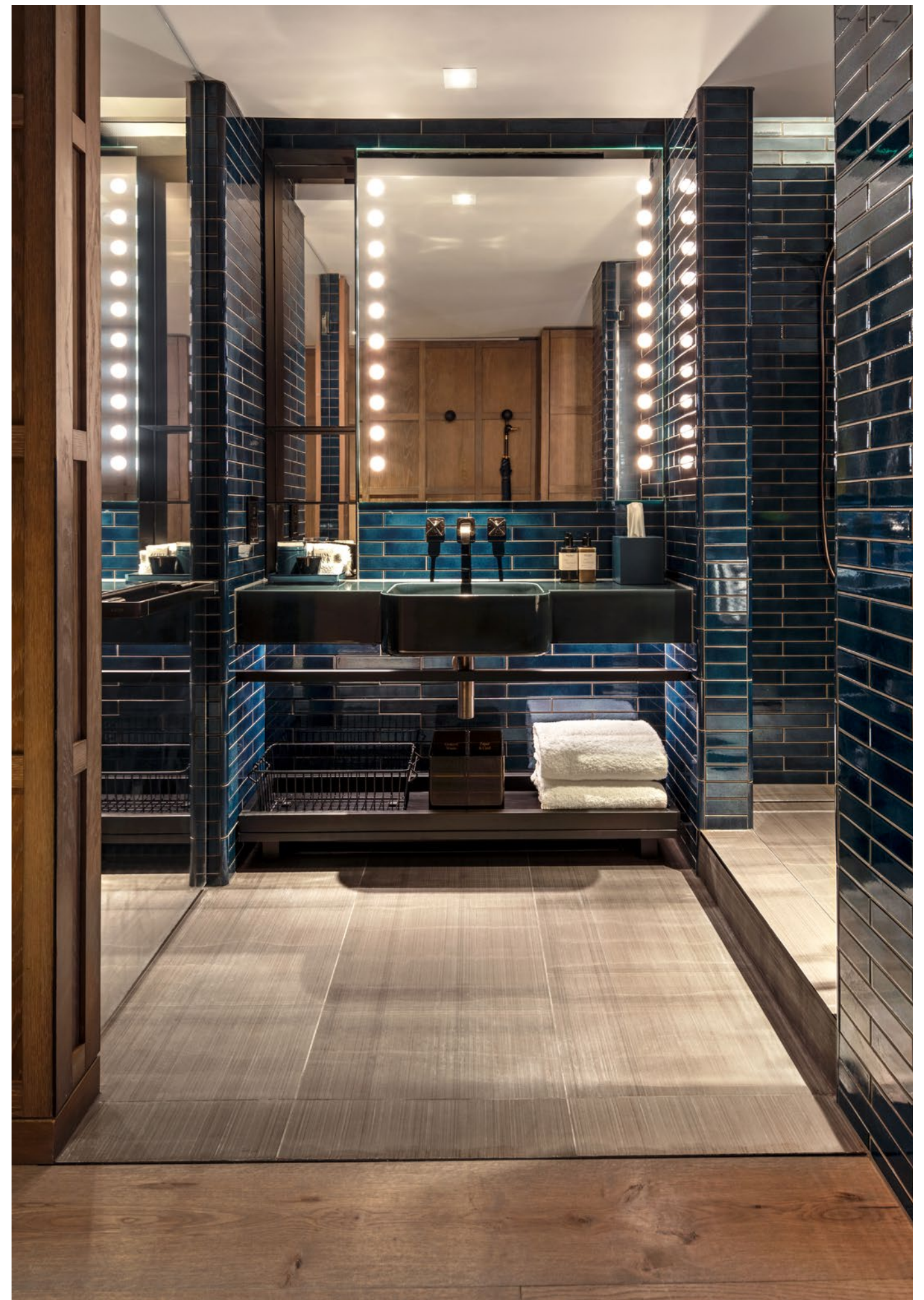
A one hundred and seventy five million pound Green Loan paid for the sustainable technology behind it, and the hotel carries a BREEAM Excellent rating, using thirty per cent less carbon than required.

None of it depends on a guest noticing where the theatre ends and the hotel begins. Whitcomb's, the megaphones and the tiled tower make the same argument in different materials.

The Londoner, 38 Leicester Square, London. Architect Woods Bagot. Interior design Yabu Pushelberg. Developer Edwardian Hotels London. 350 rooms and suites. Opened September 2021.

<https://www.thelondoner.com/>
Photography Henry Bourne





Granger Hotel

A 1904 Romanesque bank building in the Gaslamp Quarter, redesigned by Erika Baker around the San Diego Zoo that Dr Harry Wegeforth founded from inside it.



William Quayle designed the Granger Building in 1904 for Ralph Granger, a silver magnate, in a Romanesque style of arched windows and carved stone, built to hold Merchant's National Bank, a precursor to Bank of America, on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Broadway.

Dr Harry Wegeforth opened his medical practice inside it in 1910, borrowing fifty dollars to start. Six years later, working from that same building, he founded the Zoological Society of San Diego, and the zoo's earliest animals had nowhere else to go.

Tigers, bears and monkeys spent time in the Granger Building's basement while Wegeforth negotiated a permanent home in Balboa Park, a deal that took until 1918 to close. The corner where his practice stood, Fifth Avenue and Broadway, is the same corner the hotel now fronts, its ground floor windows unchanged in outline since 1904.

A hotel that redesigns around the zoo, not the bank

Erika Baker, creative director of Oram Hotels, led the redesign with Alvin and Kevin Mansour of Oram Holdings, choosing to answer the building's zoo history rather than its banking one.

A ceiling mural of abstract elephants and lions runs through the public rooms, painted by Baker with the San Diego artist Taylor Wilson, alongside a vintage Philip North painting bought for the collection.

Imported handmade tiles and an exotic rose coloured stone carry the safari reference into the rooms, set against velvet and animal print upholstery and custom rattan armoires built for all ninety six guestrooms, the abstraction favoured over a literal menagerie throughout, a decision that keeps the reference reading as design rather than theme.



What a hundred and twenty years leaves behind

The building's own fabric survived the conversion. Its arched twelve foot windows and carved stone entrance remain from Quayle's 1904 design, and the original doors, a hundred and twenty years old, still carry their mail slots, retrofitted rather than replaced.

The tin ceilings, ornate and original, went through a full restoration instead of a reproduction, kept as the loudest historical detail while lime wash and Italian marble mosaic bring in the newer material palette around them.

Five venues run through the ground floor and basement, 5th and Lox, The Parlor Room, Solana Coffee, Extraordinary Desserts and Bond Fine Spirits, each holding a different room rather than one restaurant filling it, closer to how the bank, the surgery and the basement menagerie once shared one roof without pretending to be the same space, a plan that survives partly because Wegeforth's own practice was never grand enough to demand the whole building for itself, only a corner of it, doctor's rooms above a working bank.



A palette pulled from the animals, not the archive

Blush, chartreuse and cerulean carry the safari idea through the guestrooms, set against light tones with navy and espresso accents so the reference reads as colour rather than costume, and bespoke Le Labo amenities finish the rooms without asking them to look like a period piece.

Ninety six rooms, four of them corner suites, sit above the ground floor rooms where the zoo argument is loudest, the building's Fifth Avenue and Broadway corner unchanged since the day Wegeforth first opened his practice there.

The corner suites take the arched twelve foot windows Quayle built for a bank and turn them into the room's main event, daylight doing on the upper floors what the mural and the mosaic do downstairs.

None of the design depends on a guest knowing Wegeforth's name. A mural of elephants, a rose coloured stone, a hallway door still carrying its hundred year old mail slot: each one argues the same point in a different material, that the zoo spent its first winters here before it ever had a park to call its own.

The bank is easy to research and the zoo takes more digging, which is exactly why the second story was the better brief. A building can be a Romanesque landmark on paper and still be, in practice, the place a doctor kept his tigers before the city had a proper zoo.

Granger Hotel Gaslamp Quarter, San Diego. Design Erika Baker for Oram Hotels, with Alvin and Kevin Mansour, Oram Holdings. Ninety six rooms and suites. Reopened 2024.

<https://grangerhotel.com/>



One&Only The Palm

DSA Architects International and WA International built One&Only The Palm low and garden set on Palm Jumeirah, in a Modern Arabesque of Alhambra tile and Andalusian courtyards.



One&Only The Palm opened on Palm Jumeirah in 2010, the fourth property in Sol Kerzner's One&Only collection and the third he built in Dubai, following One&Only Royal Mirage and Atlantis, The Palm.

General manager Michael Payne reported seventeen hundred workers on site in the resort's final construction push, with no delays against the original schedule, a detail Kerzner himself pointed to as proof of Dubai's own pace of building at the time.

DSA Architects International handled design development and site supervision, working in conjunction with Creative Kingdom, on a low rise plan of freestanding mansions and villas set into terraced gardens rather than gathered into a single tower block.

Palm Jumeirah's fronds were reclaimed from the Gulf only a few years before construction began, asking more of the new ground than a single footprint.

A geometry carried from stone to floor

WA International led the interiors on what both practices call a Modern Arabesque concept, drawing on the Alhambra, Andalusian courtyard architecture and wider Moorish tilework rather than the glass towers Palm Jumeirah is better known for.

White marble and Azul Macauba stone run through the public rooms, and the lobby floor carries a Moorish floral pattern cut by waterjet rather than laid by hand, the same geometric grammar repeating from a fourteenth century Andalusian palace down to a machine cut Dubai floor.

Courtyards, arched colonnades and shaded loggias carry the same Andalusian reference outdoors, breaking the resort into smaller garden rooms rather than one continuous lobby.



Four rooms, one language

STAY by Yannick Alléno, ZEST, 101 Dining Lounge and Bar and the Lobby Lounge each take a different room, the Modern Arabesque materials carrying between them rather than repeating once. Each venue keeps its own hours and view, a small district rather than one hall.

Alléno, then the chef behind three Michelin starred Le Meurice in Paris, brought STAY to the resort as his first restaurant outside France, a French menu inside the same Andalusian language. The pairing gave the resort a design argument and a culinary one at the same time, a Parisian kitchen operating inside rooms built to a Moorish and Andalusian brief rather than a European one.

Villas and mansions, not a single block

The accommodation runs to ninety three rooms and suites, from Manor House Premiere Rooms to a penthouse Manor Grand Palm Suite, with a further run of Palm Beach Mansions and Beachfront Villas set apart across the garden plot beyond them.

Kerzner's own account of the build describes ninety sandstone villas and mansions arranged like a country club rather than a hotel block, carved wooden furniture and egg shaped tubs inside, frangipani, lemon and tangerine trees planted between them. Avenues of tall palms run between the buildings rather than corridors, a landscaping choice that keeps the resort feeling closer to an estate than a tower.

A brand built from the same tiles

Inaria Design, the London studio behind One&Only's identity work, built the resort's own visual language after the building was finished rather than before it, basing its motif on Arabic mathematical principles rendered organically rather than copied as ornament.

The result sits metallic copper foil on a deep aubergine ground, a pairing that reads as jewellery rather than signage, and it draws on the same Moorish geometry DSA Architects and WA International had already built into the stone and the floor, a design argument carried from the site plan through to the print and stationery without changing its source.

It is an unusual sequence for a resort of this scale, where branding is more often commissioned early and handed down to the architects as a set of rules. Here the building set the geometry first, and the identity work found its pattern already built rather than the other way round.

None of it depends on a guest knowing the Alhambra reference by name. A waterjet cut floor pattern, a copper foil monogram and a low garden plan of villas and mansions each make the same point in a different material, that a single geometric idea can run from architecture through branding without repeating itself once.

The Modern Arabesque brief could have stayed a phrase in a design deck. Carried this precisely from a fourteenth century Andalusian palace to a Dubai lobby floor, and on again into a brand identity finished years later, it became an argument about how far one idea can travel without losing its source.

One&Only The Palm, Palm Jumeirah, Dubai. Architecture DSA Architects International with Creative Kingdom. Interior design WA International. Brand identity Inaria Design. Ninety three rooms and suites, plus mansions and villas. Opened 2010.

<https://www.oneandonlyresorts.com/the-palm>



Círculo Mexicano

Ambrosi Etchegaray rebuilt the house where Manuel Álvarez Bravo was born as a camera would be built, in filters, frames and light sources rather than rooms.

Manuel Álvarez Bravo, the photographer whose work defined twentieth century Mexican image making, was born at this address and spent his formative years here, before photographing his 1931 study *El Ensueño*, *The Daydream*, inside these same walls.

Jorge Ambrosi and Gabriela Etchegaray took that history as a design instruction. The nineteenth century townhouse is organised around filters, frames and light sources, a camera's working parts rendered as architecture.

The roof had already collapsed before the architects arrived, and rather than replace it invisibly, they read the gap as the site's own instruction, opening a full courtyard where a floor once stood.

Grupo Habita, the developer behind a run of Mexican boutique hotels, opened Círculo Mexicano in October 2020, in the historic centre a few streets from the Metropolitan Cathedral, the National Palace and the Templo Mayor.

A courtyard built from a hole in the roof

The collapsed roof became the plan's central argument. Where a floor once sat, the architects opened a full courtyard down to ground level, flooding the building with the natural light no nineteenth century townhouse was built to hold.

That courtyard now runs as a market rather than a lobby. Simple by Trista and the chef collective Ona both trading from stalls set into the same space guests cross to reach their rooms, the ground floor kept public rather than sealed off.

Black granite, pale quarried stone, water and planting carry the material language upward from the courtyard, a palette the architects describe as evoking the pre-Hispanic foundations still layered in the subsoil beneath the cathedral district.

That layering is literal, an Aztec ceremonial centre once beneath this same ground.



Twenty five rooms, eighteen of them with their own sky

Twenty five rooms sit across the upper floors, eighteen of them built around a private skylit patio and seven more looking onto the pedestrian street below, each room choosing between an interior sky and an exterior one rather than a single fixed outlook.

Custom furniture from La Metropolitana follows a Shaker logic through the rooms, the same honesty toward material and joinery that Ambrosi Etchegaray point to when they describe the wider project's ambition toward architectural lightness.

Selected photographs by Álvarez Bravo hang through the hotel in collaboration with his own foundation, so the building's namesake tenant is present as more than an address on a plaque, his own images returned to the rooms he once lived among.

El Ensueño, the 1931 study he shot inside these same walls, gave the hotel a starting image rather than a mood board, a photograph made in the building standing in for the brief no client document could have written as precisely.

A rooftop aimed at the buildings that came before it

A rooftop pool and restaurant complete the plan, positioned for a direct line to the Metropolitan Cathedral, the National Palace and the Templo Mayor, three separate centuries of the same site stacked in one view.

Grupo Habita has built its reputation on hotels that read one historic building rather than import a house style.

None of it depends on a guest knowing Álvarez Bravo's photograph by name. A courtyard opened from a collapsed roof, a market trading where a lobby would normally sit, a room built around its own patch of sky: each argues the same point differently, that a camera's vocabulary can organise a building a century after it organised a photograph.

Círculo Mexicano, Centro Histórico, Mexico City.
Architecture Ambrosi Etchegaray. Twenty five rooms.
Opened October 2020.

<https://www.circulomexicano.com/en/>
Photography Sergio López



Thermae Bath Spa

Grimshaw set a stone cube inside a glass envelope, so bathers could use Britain's only natural thermal springs again without a Georgian street watching them do it.



Bath's springs are the warmest geothermal water in Britain, and they had fed the city's baths since Roman times, but by the late twentieth century nobody could legally swim in them. Public bathing closed in 1978, and the city spent nearly three decades finding a way to reopen it.

Sir Nicholas Grimshaw and Partners won the commission in 1997, against more than a hundred and forty other practices, with a plan that treated the water as only half the problem. The other half was privacy, in a World Heritage city where Georgian terraces look directly down onto Bath Street.

Their answer was a freestanding stone cube set inside a glass envelope, faced in the same golden Bath stone as its neighbours, its glazing broken into circular lenses and translucent panels that let daylight through while keeping the bathers inside unseen from the street.

New water had to be found first. Engineers drilled an inclined borehole at fifty eight degrees to reach clean limestone.

One building holding five listed ones together

The New Royal Bath is only the newest addition to a site holding five separate listed buildings. Thomas Baldwin's Grade I 7 and 7a Bath Street, John Palmer's Grade I number 8, John Wood the Younger's Grade II* Hot Bath and the Grade I Cross Bath all needed restoring rather than replacing, Donald Insall Associates handling that half of the brief, alongside the 1718 Hetling Pump Room a few doors along, now the site's visitor centre.

The Cross Bath stands on a Roman cistern more than two thousand years old, fed by its own Cross Spring, and carries a sculpture by William Pye inscribed with a line from Ted Hughes, a separate open air thermal pool from the main complex rather than a second entrance to it.

Grimshaw's cube sits on the site of a 1920s swimming bath, itself built over an 1831 pool by G. P. Manners, demolished in 1998 to clear the ground, so the newest structure on the site is also the one standing on the shortest history.



A pool held up on columns rather than a floor

Inside the cube, the Minerva Bath takes a free form shape rather than a rectangle, its water supported on slender columns above the lower levels, transparent bridges and split levels absorbing the floor changes between the old buildings and the new one, without a single conventional staircase in sight.

Naturally split Kashmir granite paves the floors throughout, chosen alongside steel and concrete for a palette Grimshaw partner Mark Middleton has described as built from form, geometry, texture and colour rather than a copy of the classical detail around it.

The rooftop pool inverts the whole argument

Where the ground floor hides its bathers behind stone and glass, the rooftop pool does the opposite, open to the same Georgian skyline the lower levels were built to screen out, whirlpools, neck massage jets and air benches set against the view rather than away from it.

Fibre optic lighting runs through the building after dark, a chromotherapy system concealed carefully enough that it was designed not to spill light into the windows of the neighbouring terraces it shares its street with.

A wellness suite added after the doors opened

A 2017 renovation replaced the original glass steam pods with a Wellness Suite, two aromatic steam rooms, an ice chamber, an infrared sauna and a Celestial Relaxation Room added to the original 2006 building rather than folded into its first design.

The Hot Bath kept its own thermal pool and added an aqua sound system alongside twelve treatment rooms, while the Minerva Bath, the larger of the two main pools, takes its name from Sulis Minerva, the goddess worshipped at these same springs for nearly four hundred years under Rome.





None of it depends on a bather noticing the borehole angle or the granite's origin. A stone cube that hides its pool from the street and then opens it to the sky one floor up argues its own case in glass and water, without needing the geology explained, or the goddess the larger pool is named for.

Thermae Bath Spa, Bath. Architecture Sir Nicholas Grimshaw and Partners. Restoration Donald Insall Associates. Two open air thermal pools among five listed buildings. Opened August 2006.

<https://www.thermaebathspa.com/>
Photography Edmund Sumner, courtesy of
Thermae Bath Spa

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