

BY DESIGN

MODERN DESIGN-LED HOTELS DELIVER MORE THAN IMMACULATE FACADES. CREATIVE CONCEPTS AND INNOVATIVE PROGRAMMING MAKE FOR TRANSFORMATIVE GUEST EXPERIENCES

Words by **MADLIN TOMELTY**



Pedras Salgadas Spa & Nature Park | Portugal



Guesthouse Vora | Greece

A dated, printed bedspread; the token, geographically vague landscape painting on the wall; high-gloss wooden furniture; a bulky TV cabinet with a puzzling amount of storage; beige walls, beige carpet, a beige bathroom and a beige ambience. It wasn't so long ago that hotel rooms looked like this. As recently as the 1990s, boutique hotels with design-led interiors were thin on the ground. The hospitality landscape was dominated by global hotel chains that had a uniform look, so that whether you were in Bangkok or Berlin, your experience would be largely the same.

Today, the very opposite is true: a boutique hotel revolution defined by intelligent design, luxurious comforts and local flavour is sweeping the globe. High-thread-count linens and expensive goose-down duvets top sumptuous beds; unique artworks by local artists that have been handpicked for just that room adorn the walls along with a mounted TV offering complimentary Netflix; beautiful wooden floors are underfoot; designer fittings pepper the room; and the ambience is one of warmth and familiarity, the likes of which used to be found only in high-end residential apartments. Guests can even stay at the same hotel repeatedly and have a completely unique experience each time, thanks to the rise of individualised rooms.

The humble hotel has become an experience in and of itself, rather than playing a supporting role in a riveting holiday tale, and Design Hotels founder, Claus Sendlinger, saw it coming a mile away. He knew there was a need for a portfolio of curated boutique hotels, because that was the kind of hotel he and his friends wanted to stay in, and yet they were rarer than hens' teeth. In 1993, Sendlinger launched Design Hotels, the first hotel marketing consortium dedicated to design-led accommodation, with just 10 unique member properties that defied the copy-and-paste ethos typical of previous decades. The company now has a portfolio of 350 hotels in more than 200 destinations around the globe, and of the 400 member applications Design Hotels receives each year, an average of just five per cent are accepted, based on a rigorous selection criteria. Aesthetic is important, but even more

so is whether the project has an original, distinct and timeless concept underpinning it.

These hotel concepts, conceived by visionary hoteliers Design Hotels call 'Originals', "can aim to uncover a destination or showcase an aspect of a place," says Jinou Park, Vice President, Asia Pacific at Design Hotels. "The concept can be applied in the architecture and interior design, programming at the hotel, food and beverage concepts – it is how everything is executed and falls into place that tells a distinctly unique story."

Rosie Morley, Associate Director at award-winning Melbourne design firm Carr, agrees that good looks alone aren't enough in the now-competitive landscape of boutique and niche lifestyle hotels. She sees this shift to concept, and the idea that good hospitality design is founded on an authentic narrative, as one of the biggest changes that has occurred in the industry over the past decade. "One of the big changes is that sensory engagement, of making sure we're orchestrating an immersive experience that touches all of those senses, because we remember environments through >>



The Dwell Hotel | USA



Lion Sands Game Reserve | South Africa



A STUDY IN MODERN HOTEL DESIGN

Designed in partnership with legendary architect Kengo Kuma — the principal architect for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Stadium — and award-winning and longtime Ace partner, Commune Design, Ace Hotel Kyoto will open on 16 April 2020 as a 213-room hotel. Constructed within a part new-build and part-historic structure that was once home to Kyoto Central Telephone Company, Ace Hotel Kyoto will feature an animated lobby, a verdant garden courtyard, a gallery, event spaces, collaborations with local artists, a cafe and three standalone restaurants.

"Kyoto has been a longstanding global hub that has provided inspiration for countless artists, designers, musicians, filmmakers and poets," says Kelly Sawdon, Partner and Chief Brand Officer, Ace Hotel Group. "Kyoto is a city that generates creativity and inspires travel, and we hope Ace will serve as a central gathering place for locals and travellers."

A thoughtfully designed and vibrant space, Ace Hotel Kyoto will stand as a monument to the creative epicenter of Japan that exalts simple pleasures and respect for traditions.

Says Kuma, Principal at Kengo Kuma and Associates: "I intended to design a 'Cultural Catalyst' for various people to visit and create a seamless relationship with Kyoto's community."



LOCAL IMMERSION

CASE IN POINT: MOXY NYC EAST VILLAGE

With interior design by Rockwell Group and architecture by Stonehill Taylor, Moxy East Village is conceived as a vertical timeline, drawing inspiration from various eras in East Village history, from rock ‘n’ roll and renegade art to LGBTQ+ activism and the punk era. Interior design is inspired by urban archaeology, with the hotel’s 13 floors loosely conceived as homages to the East Village’s American counterculture scene through the decades.

Located directly across from the legendary concert venue Webster Hall, the hotel features 286 design-driven bedrooms, co-working spaces and tech-savvy amenities, as well as lively restaurants and bars – all at an affordable price.

Part of Marriott International’s experiential Moxy Hotels brand, Moxy East Village has a focus on playful cultural programming, allowing the hotel to integrate into the broader community, introducing guests and locals to the neighbourhood’s creators, tastemakers, and businesses. “We conceived of the hotel as a sort of crossroads: Guests can use it as a starting point for their explorations beyond the four walls, and local creators and businesses can use it as an extension of their community,” said Mitchell Hochberg, President of Lightstone, who developed the property. Among the innovative features, Talk@Moxy is an ongoing series of discussions showcasing local voices and the #SweatatMoxy series introduces guests and locals to area wellness experts who will offer morning rooftop meditation sessions as well as meditation videos on the in-room TVs.

“The move towards small-footprint, boutique properties has diversified the hotel landscape, allowing unique accommodations to open in unexpected places.”



Tsingpu Tulou | China



Jackalope Hotel | Mornington Peninsula

that,” says Morley. That means considering how guests access the space, how they arrive, how they move through the space, what they see, and what they feel. “It’s not [just] the room, it’s not [just] the meal, it’s the entire experience,” she says.

Carr Design Group is behind such hotel game-changers as Mornington Peninsula’s Jackalope and United Places in South Yarra. Both properties are heavily concept-led, with ultra-contemporary Jackalope setting a new standard of hotel design when it opened in 2017 looking nothing like any regional winery property anyone had ever seen. An alchemic narrative of wine creation weaves its way through every part of the vineyard property, with details such as apothecary-style tubes in the bar, 10,000 light globes covering the ceiling of the hatted restaurant, and a moody, dark hallway lit by multicoloured neon ceiling lights. Getting from the front door to your room is an all-encompassing journey that plays on each of the senses and immerses guests in the world of wine-making.

At Design Hotels member property Tsingpu Tulou Retreat in rural China, the narrative is one where guests feel as if they

have landed in 17th-century China. Drawing inspiration from ancient Chinese customs, Tsingpu Tulou Retreat aims to bridge the gap between local tradition and contemporary design, with “a humanistic architectural approach so as to present the hotel as being inseparable from its environment,” according to the Design Hotels website. An original and weather-worn exterior, centuries-old rammed earth and wooden buildings and a traditional Chinese courtyard complement a minimalist interior that quietly echoes the simple ways of traditional Chinese life. On-site activities inspired by artisanal customs like citrus-tea making, bamboo-shoot scavenging, paper cutting, Tulou wood painting, and local tea and porcelain production further immerse guests in a bygone era, creating an experience that is heavily steeped in its location.

Think Globally, Act Locally

This idea of rooting a hotel’s concept and design in its location is one of the most exciting characteristics of the current hospitality renaissance, and one not only seen in heavily concept-driven hotels like Tsingpu Tulou Retreat and Jackalope. The move towards small-footprint, boutique properties has diversified the hotel landscape, allowing unique accommodations to open in unexpected places. “We look for innovation in all aspects of hospitality that have the power to deliver a transformative, purposeful experience,” says Park. “This is why our member properties are not destination-led and can equally be found in global cities as well as remote off-grid hideaways.”

In Sydney, small, stylised hotels the likes of The Old Clare in Chippendale and Hotel Palisade in The Rocks have put heritage suburbs and local neighbourhoods on travellers’ radars. It is now not unusual for travellers to decide on the area they will stay in based on a particular hotel that piques their interest. “These hotels help discerning travellers feel special and add relevance to their trip,” states a 2018 Tourism Accommodation Australia (TAA) report on the nation’s hotel revolution. In this way, hotel design is playing a role in transforming the way we travel, affecting how we experience new destinations and even reshaping entire locales. >>



The Hotel Palisade | Sydney

Morley believes these design-led, experiential lifestyle hotels in unlikely places offer “the promise of another world.” She adds: “It’s suggesting a transformational experience of some description, it’s suggesting an elevation of lifestyle and it links right back to the values that Millennial travellers have.”

The literal translation of this “think globally, act locally” attitude, as the TAA report puts it, is the incorporation of specific design features into hotels that are unique to that destination. “From prime city locations to pristine resort locations, hotel design today is aimed at complementing the landscape, becoming an integral component of the local area,” it says.

The design uniformity of chain hotels is becoming a distant memory, with large-scale new builds like the recently opened The Ritz-Carlton Perth having grounded its entire design, experience, and food and beverage concepts in the unique qualities of Western Australia. The hotel’s palette of natural earth tones nods to the hues found in the state’s rugged landscapes, and luxurious natural materials, such as an extraordinary 10,000 pieces of handpicked Kimberley sandstone, feature on the building’s exterior and in the lobby. The hotel’s signature restaurant, Hearth, offers new interpretations of the classic Australian barbecue and showcases the region’s beautiful produce; the menu at its cocktail bar, Songbird, focuses on native Australian botanicals; and the spa treatments are inspired by Australia’s natural healing products.

Restoration projects have become another way for hotel brands to debut hotels with a story or narrative already in-built. For example, in 2019 InterContinental Lyon – Hotel Dieu opened in one of the city’s most iconic and historic buildings, the hospital Hotel Dieu, after a painstaking four-year restoration by renowned interior designer Jean-Philippe Nuel. Also last year, Six Senses announced it will open in London’s former Whiteleys department store, a grand Art Deco site, in 2023 in what will be its first home in the UK. Similar restorations are being seen across Australia, from the industrial conversions of Sydney



Ship Inn Stanley | Tasmania

(Paramount House Hotel) to the public-building restorations of Perth (COMO The Treasury) and heritage-house conversions of Tasmania (Ship Inn Stanley).

There's No Place Like Home Hotel

Answering the call of the sophisticated new traveller pursuing aesthetic beauty and destination immersion is the new wave of out-of-the-box, wilderness hideaways that seem to defy the very idea of a hotel. Igloos in the Arctic, bubble rooms in the jungle, tents in the desert, treehouses, tiny homes, converted ships and underwater rooms such as Queensland’s Reefsuites attempt to find balance between the authenticity and simplicity of nature and the aspirations of modern life. “It’s no longer enough to accept a hotel for being simply ‘a bed for the night’ – it’s a key part of >>



Paramount House Hotel | Sydney



The Prestige | Malaysia



InterContinental Lyon – Hotel Dieu | France

“From prime city locations to pristine resort locations, hotel design today is aimed at complementing the landscape, becoming an integral component of the local area”

*Tourism Accommodation Australia
2018 Hotel Innovation Report*



Treehouse London | UK

CONCEPT COMES FIRST

At the recently opened hotel Treehouse London, every detail has been imagined through the lens of childhood, with guest rooms featuring cuckoo clocks and sleeping bag throws, and programming such as resident horticulturalists giving tours of local gardens, book clubs and poetry slams on offer.



Hyatt Regency | Amsterdam

GREEN IS GOLDEN

“Hotel designers are increasingly blurring the lines between interior and exterior spaces, with vertical hydroponic gardens, indoor waterfalls, multilevel terraces and rustic wooden furnishings enabling guests to connect with nature... Living green walls are now a feature of exterior and lobby design and there is greater emphasis on using natural lighting, along with direct and indirect exposure to nature.”

*Tourism Accommodation Australia 2018
Hotel Innovation Report*



WORK IT OUT

Singapore-based Next Story Group launched its first combined co-working space and hotel brand in Sydney's Alexandria last year.

THE TECH SPECS

88%

of guests expect traditional room keys to be ditched in favour of facial recognition for room access within the next 30 years

81%

foresee in-room augmented reality functions that would enable them to speak face-to-face with friends and family

79%

hope room service will become more intuitive, with artificial intelligence knowing the kind of food and drink individuals might want to order

69%

said they do not want to see single-use plastic in the hotels of the future

72%

want interactive mirrors that enable them to try different looks virtually

74%

want a personalised virtual concierge assigned to them

Source: Globetrender and research by Yotel

Scorpius Greece



San Giorgio | Greece



Cretan Malia Park Resort | Greece



the holiday, and people are looking to get a ‘sense of place’ rather than a ‘home away from home’,” says Jenny Southan, editor and founder of *Globetrender*, an online magazine and travel trend forecasting agency in the UK.

And yet, rising in tandem with quirky nature hideaways is a new wave of hotels that feel more residential than commercial in form and function. “There’s a lot of influencing back-and-forth between the common spaces in hotels, restaurants and residential spaces... now every workplace looks like a restaurant and every home office looks like a public space in a hotel,” says Design Hotels’ Park. This ‘home as hotel’ revolution sees architects and interior designers transforming traditional hotel lobbies into living room-style social hubs, and hotel rooms into cosy boudoirs so that from check in to check out the guest experience is one that reflects the comforts of home.

For Morley, that home-share rental sites like Airbnb have shifted the market and played a part in the home-hotel revolution is undeniable. “I think that the rise of Airbnb is one of the game-changers... Airbnbs link directly into something that feels very, very personal – that’s what people want,” she says. You only have to walk into a new-build hotel in any Australian capital and find an interior that feels personalised, localised and humanised in a way that hotels never used to be. Morley explains it as removing the “corporate” factor and “prescriptive spaces” from hotels, so that guests have greater autonomy and a choice in how and where they spend their time in the hotel. “They feel like they’ve discovered something or that they’re able to choose how they occupy or use the space,” she explains. “At home, you just choose everything as you want it to be. So we look at the conventions of hotel design and bring that back down to be closer to the experience you have arriving at your own home.” This includes the use of ambient lighting and a greater emphasis on natural light; the incorporation of sustainable, natural materials like plants, wood and reclaimed stone; and the introduction of smart technologies such as keyless entry and in-room iPads.

Today’s hospitality designers are coming up with innovative ways to catch and hold visitors’ attention by offering myriad touch-points on site. Lobbies are now playing host to interactive cafes and delicatessens, co-working spaces, art displays, boutiques, oversized lounges that invite... well, lounging, and complimentary experiences like daily cheese and wine hours, rooftop yoga and mixology classes. Hoteliers are entering into partnerships with renowned chefs to create design-focused on-site restaurants that come with instant credibility, along with bars that beckon a breed of stylish, trend-sensitive guests and locals to linger longer and socialise. Even partnerships with car brands, fashion brands and champagne houses have become the norm among Millennial-focused lifestyle hotels. >>



Little Albion | Sydney



The Peninsula Hotel | Hong Kong

Morley says creating an experience that is unique and which guests can't find elsewhere is an absolute top priority among hotel clients, and this includes creating spaces that are instantly interesting and highly 'Instagrammable'. "In our design, we have to be aware of providing ample opportunity to encourage that self-perpetuating marketing campaign that social media brings you. In the last five years, I feel like that is something that is always on the brief – it has to be Instagram-worthy," Morley says.



The Fantauzzo | Brisbane

Artists in Residence

And what could be more Insta-worthy than the tallest mural in the Southern Hemisphere? Perth's Art Series hotel, The Adnate, features just that, taking up an entire side of the exterior of the 25-storey building, acting as a permanent reminder of the hotel's design-led, experiential offering. Blink and you won't miss it. Hotels are now embracing art as an integral part of their design DNA, with some even boasting purpose-built galleries in addition to a curated selection of wall art and sculptures throughout the property.

Each of the 199 guest rooms at Midnight Hotel in Canberra, for example, features a custom artwork designed and created by acclaimed artist Thomas Bucich. Part of Bucich's 'Relic' series, each piece features reclaimed Australian wood and bark plated in copper or nickel, is one-of-a-kind and was created solely for Midnight Hotel. Further advocating original art, each level of the hotel features a bespoke artwork by Australian artist Tom Adair, part of the 'Uncovering Braddon' series that shines a light on hotel's neighbourhood. One of Crystalbrook Collection's three Cairns hotels, Bailey, has dedicated spaces for art in public areas, and each of the 12 guest floors features a separate artist, with this art changing regularly. The hotel also hosts quarterly art initiatives such as exhibitions, evening classes, poetry recitals, dance performances and even live graffiti sessions. The Peninsula Hotels' Art in Resonance program uses a 'Travelling Gallery' of contemporary art by emerging artists that moves between the brand's 10 global locations. Each hotel also hosts artist talks, studio visits and panel discussions with leading artists, creatives and thinkers.

Meanwhile, in the village of Braemar in Scotland, not far from the royal Balmoral Estate, private country house-style boutique hotel, The Fife Arms, owned by the founders of modern art gallery Hauser & Wirth, boasts an extensive, eclectic art collection of more than 14,000 pieces from the 19th century to today that have been thoughtfully integrated into every >>



The Adnate | Perth



The Fife Arms | Scotland



QT Hotel Perth

BOUTIQUE IS BEAUTIFUL

IT'S HARD TO KEEP UP WITH THE NUMBER OF BOUTIQUE HOTEL BRANDS THAT HAVE OPENED IN RECENT YEARS. EVEN HOTEL JUGGERNAUTS IHG, ACCOR, HILTON AND MARRIOTT HAVE ALL LAUNCHED A NUMBER OF BOUTIQUE HOTEL COLLECTIONS. BIG NAMES INCLUDE...

- Ovolo Hotels
- QT Hotels & Resorts
- Voco (IHG)
- Indigo (IHG)
- MGallery by Sofitel (Accor)
- SO/ (Accor)
- Art Series (Accor)
- Moxy (Marriott)
- Edition Hotels (Marriott)
- Aloft (Marriott)
- Curio (Hilton)
- Autograph Collection (Marriott)

"Each hotel in the Autograph Collection is a product of vision, handpicked for its mark of craft, heartfelt design and authentic sense of place. These principles guide the curation of the portfolio, ensuring each hotel experience is remarkably unlike anything else."

SEAN HUNT

Area Vice President, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific at Marriott International. Midnight Hotel Canberra & Pier One Hotel Sydney are both Autograph Collection hotels.

© Image courtesy of Sim Canetty-Clarke



THE FUTURE OF HOTELS

JENNY SOUTHAN FROM GLOBETRENDER DISCUSSES WHAT THE HOTELS OF THE FUTURE COULD LOOK LIKE

Capsule Hotels

“I am particularly interested in micro or capsule hotels, which have been big in Japan for decades but are only just catching on in the West. Yotel has been a forerunner but there are lots of other interesting brands such as Citizen M, Moxy, Motto, Sleepbox, Hoxton, Mama Shelter and Sister City. To make up for having tiny rooms, some of these properties have vibrant and expansive public spaces that include co-working areas, libraries and coffee lounges.”

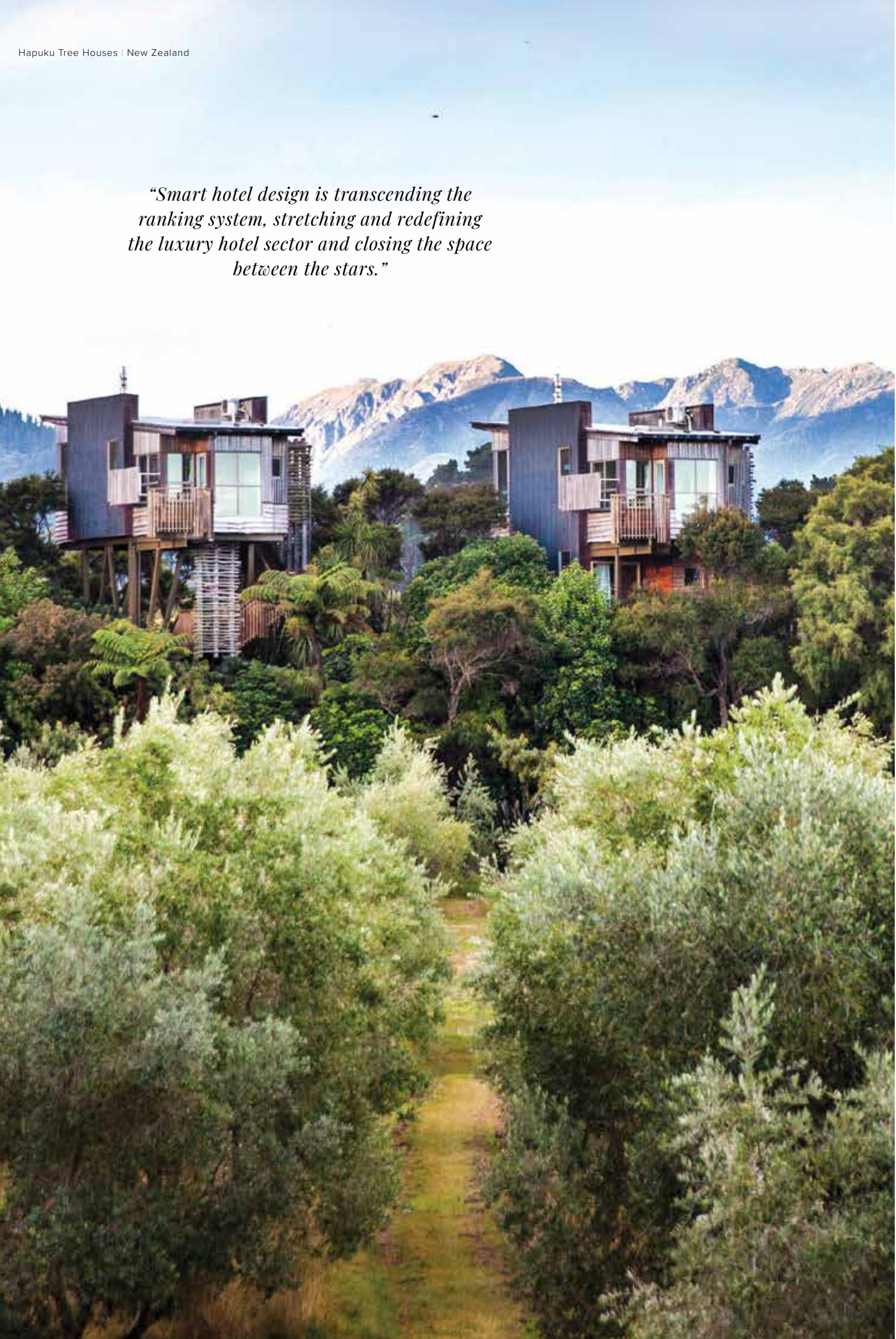
Luxury Bunks

“Another cool trend is ‘luxury bunks’ whereby hip hotel brands are deliberately catering to family and group stays – LifeHouse, Jo&Joe and Generator are great examples of companies that have reimagined a concept that was once exclusively associated with hostels and budget travellers.”

AI

“Over the next 10 years I predict an increase in the use of artificial intelligence in hotels, which will enable innovations such as facial recognition and robotics. Over in Hangzhou, China, the Flyzoo hotel already lets people use their face to unlock doors and pay for food in the restaurant, while new Nhow hotel in London has a robotic butler that will deliver towels and water to your room. We can also expect built-in voice control technology that will allow guests to chat to an in-room assistant like Siri or Alexa, instead of having to fiddle with switches to turn off the lights.”

Hapuku Tree Houses | New Zealand



“Smart hotel design is transcending the ranking system, stretching and redefining the luxury hotel sector and closing the space between the stars.”

Rolling Huts Hotel | USA



© Image courtesy of Tim Bles

nook and cranny. Treasured antiques, including a watercolour of a stag’s head painted by Queen Victoria, sit alongside contemporary commissions by leading international artists such as Subodh Gupta and Richard Jackson. The former 19th-century hunting lodge pushes the home-as-hotel concept to home-as-gallery, with the property even hosting artists throughout the year, who immerse themselves into the local community, fostering the creation of further culturally inspired artworks.

Design for One, Design for All

But perhaps the most momentous thing of all about the hotel design revolution is the way it is democratising good design. A decade ago, coming across a mini-bar in your hotel room would warrant a ‘hallelujah’ and a fist-pump with your significant other. It was one of the things that clearly signified you were staying in a luxury hotel, while finding just a small kettle and a few sachets of instant coffee and powdered milk would tell you loud and

clear that you were definitely not. By contrast, today’s beautiful commercial spaces with their considered room details no longer reside in the realm of five stars alone. Rather, smart hotel design is transcending the ranking system, stretching and redefining the luxury hotel sector and closing the space between the stars. “Probably five years ago we were saying the star system is dead in terms of how we design spaces because it was a convention that people relied on decades ago for safety and security... [when they were] travelling a long distance and wanting to know that it had everything they needed – it was very [much about] box ticking,” Morley says.

Even budget accommodations are “utilising smart space planning, upgrading the quality of bedding, updating bathroom design, focusing on lighting and ambience, incorporating technology, incorporating a local flavour through design details and art, upgrading mini-bars and incorporating natural materials and green elements,” the TAA report states. “Rooms may be getting smaller, but they are packing a greater punch as a result of advanced design... Economy hotels used to be very standardised, but no longer.”

Morley adds that the rise of boutique hotels democratises design in that way that it “becomes a great leveller... and so therefore, by virtue, the star system becomes redundant. Those requirements that we used to have to tick are just becoming less relevant and also brand standards used to be a big fat book and now... they’re becoming flatter and skinnier and the rules are changing.” Even traditional luxury travellers are caring less about whether a hotel is four or five star, as long as the experience on offer within its four walls feels unique, personalised and experiential.

For Design Hotels’ Park, the power of good design goes even further – to transform travellers as well as the communities in which the hotels operate. “We absolutely think it’s about meaning and purpose,” he says. “If the last decade was about just bettering yourself, then this decade is about bettering the community, and everything around it.” And you thought design was just about looks.



Rockhouse | Jamaica



Anantara Jungle Bubbles | Thailand