

BEDTIME STOREYS.....

The oldest hotel in operation is believed to be a ryokan in Japan that dates back to the 8th century AD, though hotels as a building type go back much further.

Hotels have come a long way since. A good establishment can make a holiday, or alleviate the drudgery of a business trip; great establishments can become iconic, defining the cities in which they reside. The Savoy is *the* London hotel. Think of Singapore, and one readily pictures Raffles Hotel. The Waldorf-Astoria is as identifiable with New York as are Woody Allen and Simon and Garfunkel... Mention any city and at least one great hotel effortlessly rolls off the tongue. In Hong Kong it's The Peninsula. In Shanghai it's The Peace Hotel; in Bangkok, The Oriental; in Hanoi, The Metropole; Venice has Hotel Cipriani; St Petersburg, Hotel Astoria and Grand Hotel Europe.

There are also as many kinds of hotels nowadays as there are flavours of ice cream. There are boutiques and capsules, cave and bunker hotels, ice and snow ones, tree house and straw bale establishments... there's something for every taste and budget. And although history maketh a hotel iconic, that doesn't stop new ones from popping up and poking their newfangled, statement-making heads above the skyline, demanding attention and challenging the hegemony of the old guard. The Marina Bay Sands in Singapore, for instance, is clearly seeking to upstage the stately Raffles. In Hong Kong, the vertiginous Ritz-Carlton in the ICC tower is doing its best to put the ageing Peninsula in the shade.

So, what of the current trends in hotel design? Florent Nedelec, the New York-based French architect who designed The Jervois and Twenty One Whitfield boutique establishments in Hong Kong, sees "a focus on simple designs that have less unnecessary decoration but more practical [applications] and offer more space with open floorplans, open views and more daylighting". Lin Hao of The Oval Partnership notes that the present build-imperative is geared towards "sustainable design, [the] operation of environment-friendly hospitality assets, [and the development of] local-culture-inspired home-away-from-home intimate environments...". Hongkonger Steve Leung concurs: "I would say 'home-away-from-home' is one of the current trends. Hotel design nowadays tends to be warm, cosy and intimate, yet doesn't look very luxurious." Local designer-cum-hotel-critic Gary Chang suggests there is also a shift towards adaptive reuse, converting "existing structures into hotels, with possibly new additions".

On the question of which path hotel design might take in the future, Chang says, "There will be more diversified approaches to hotel design instead of standardisation and [adherence to the] golden rules, more redefining of hotels from first principles [and] more emphasis on resources, be it budget, space, time and materials, locality and identity."

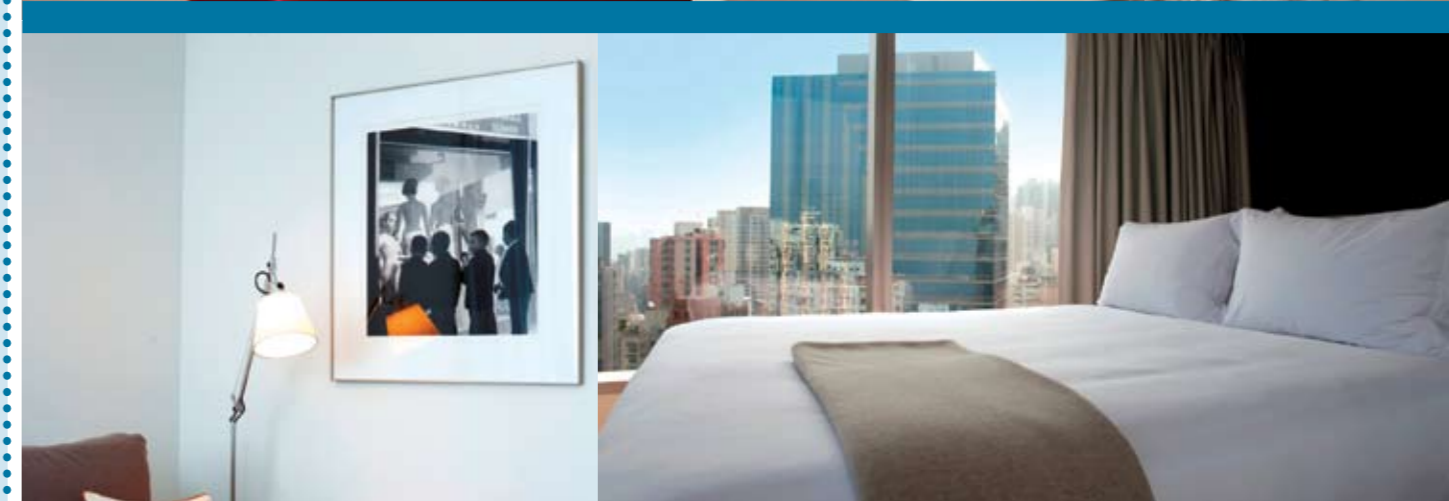
Nedelec sees the shift towards 'greener' practices gathering greater momentum: "Sustainability is one of the main design directions. Building materials have to be carefully chosen so that they have a low impact on the environment, use less energy and last longer." This view is echoed by Leung, who says, "Sustainability and heritage preservation projects are likely to be the directions [we take]."

Many of these trends are evident in a number of recent projects, some of which are featured here in our annual hotels special.

After The Putman and The Jervois, both in Hong Kong's Central district, luxury accommodation developer National Properties has opened its third boutique hotel-apartment building within walking distance of Causeway Bay. Instead of employing the likes of Andre Putman and Christian Liaigre, however, this time the company tapped the local design pool, hiring Joseph Fung to develop the interior concept and Florent Nedelec the facade.

Twenty One Whitfield offers a relaxing, 'home-style living' ambience in its 54 stylish and fully equipped suites which are spread over 36 levels. The building's elegant exterior was designed to optimise ventilation and natural light penetration. From its grey granite lobby through to its minimalist suites, Fung's main focus was on balancing aesthetics with efficient use of space. Each of the 585sq ft suites incorporates custom-designed furniture, including a queen-sized bed with attached desk; a kitchenette; state-of-the-art appliances; and floor-to-ceiling windows; all complemented by a palette of natural tones and bright little trinkets intended to remind guests of their stay. Among the support features are a business centre, a complimentary gym membership, a fifth-floor podium garden and an open-air, rooftop sun deck with barbecue facilities for rent. Given that there are only two suites per floor, guests also enjoy extra privacy, and the open layout affords a stunning city vista.

In a market already crowded with properties flaunting a similar product, Twenty One Whitfield's cosmopolitan design makes for an oasis of calm - a soothing contrast to the bustling Causeway Bay district.



TWENTY ONE WHITFIELD

HONG KONG
FLORENT NEDELEC AND JOSEPH FUNG