



Never stop designing

MARINA MRDJEN-PETROVIC TALKS TO DAVID T'KINT, PARTNER AT HBA DUBAI, ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING HIS PASSION FOR DESIGN WHILE MANAGING OTHERS

You can be the most creative designer, but if a client doesn't understand an idea you are trying to sell, you're not going anywhere. The secret of a good presentation is to make your clients dream, says David T'Kint, design director and partner at Hirsch Bedner Associates (HBA) Dubai.

From a narrative and concept to the final design, he compares his presentations to a Chanel bag, where the packaging is as equally important as what is inside.

"When I do a presentation, it is always a bit out of the box. I make my clients go through that dream factor, I walk them through the design concept right from the entrance of a hotel and all the way to the guest rooms. Because if you start explaining your concept item-by-item, where is the dream, then?"

With more than a decade of hospitality design experience, T'Kint has been successfully turning dreams into reality by working on

large-scale projects worldwide, while living in Los Angeles, Paris, Shanghai and Singapore, before settling in Dubai.

A year and a half ago, T'Kint was appointed to spearhead HBA's expansion in the MEA region. His Dubai-based team now comprises over 90 individuals, representing 30 or more countries. Together, he says, they bring a wealth of cultural knowledge and experience to each project.

"We've grown tremendously, but I don't want to become a design factory where projects just go in and out."

Apart from managing his team, T'Kint still gets involved in design projects. That's the only way, he says, to keep the passion for designing alive.

"Over the years, I've grown to a management position and nobody forced me into it, but I'm still an interior designer. A busy one. It would be physically impossible for me to work

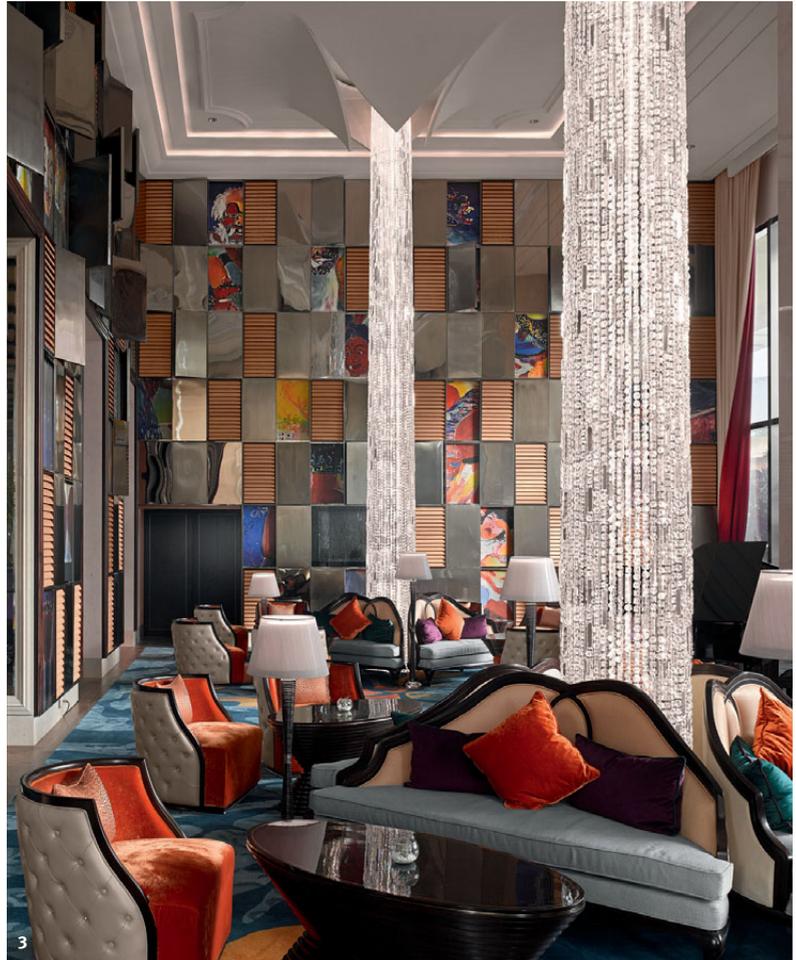


on every single project, but every year I will give my full attention to five to six projects. I will be with my clients from day one – from concept stage until the opening. They can call me on Saturday, I will be in factories and on site. It is very important to keep that passion as an interior designer.”

THE JOURNEY TO THE EAST

T’Kint moved to Dubai in August 2014 with the main lesson learned from his past ventures — the secret of a successful business worldwide is the ability to quickly adapt to to any situation the market dictates.

He explains: “If you ask me now about this market, I would say it is very volatile and that many are concerned that it will be like 2008 when everybody rushed out. Everybody is quite scared that might happen again, so they are trying to find the right balance. I still think that there is a lot going on in the GCC region. People are talking about the crisis and uncertainty, but we still sign projects. However, people are more careful how they approach them. One of the things that I’ve noticed is that a lot of investors who come to us now want to do projects very quickly,



“The hotel is an investment. Nobody builds hotels because they are beautiful. You design a hotel for a purpose. There is a market behind it. It is always about the money and the return on investment.”

because of the safety of the return on the investment.”

FROM RAFFLES TO KEMPINSKI

In the past months, T’Kint’s accomplishments include the Raffles in Jakarta, Indonesia which won several nominations and awards. He is also currently leading the teams working on the Four Seasons in Abu Dhabi, Curio by Hilton in Qatar and Dubai, Langham Place Downtown Dubai, The Address Fountain Views in Dubai, Jumeirah in Aqaba in Jordan, Kempinski in Beirut as well as properties beyond the Middle East such as the 1958 Suzhou – a Luxury Collection

Hotel in China and two boutique brands in Brussels and Belgium.

“Before I relocated from Singapore to Dubai, I had only one project in Beirut, but now with projects in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar, I am exposed to so many new things. The Kempinski project in Beirut is an ode and reinterpretation of Lebanese culture. We’ve done everything from interior and lighting design, to graphics and artwork. The brief from the developer was that they wanted ‘everything Lebanese’, so we researched Lebanese artists living worldwide and we’ve put together a very contemporary collection with a flair of Lebanon. It has

- 1 David t’Kint, design director and partner at HBA Dubai.
- 2 The design for Raffles, Jakarta pays a tribute to Hendra Gunawan, one of Indonesia’s greatest painters.
- 3 Writer’s Bar at Raffles.

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COMPRESSING THE LUXURY

Designing a guest room is what T’Kint likes the most, but admits it is the most challenging part of the design.

“It is a small but very complex experience,” he says. “I’ve recently worked on a hotel project in Brussels that we are opening in a few months. The room is only 27m², but has every single feature of a 5star hotel from a proper bathroom with separate toilet to wardrobe, luggage rack, minibar, desk, seating area and bed. The biggest challenge was making it still feel comfortable and luxurious. For instance, in Asia, the standard room for a 5-star hotel is 45m² while in Europe it is between 25 and 30m².”



strong narrative throughout but it is not too obvious.”

Another recent project delivered by HBA is The Flavours restaurant in Hilton, Al Ain.

“One of the guests entered the restaurant and said: ‘Finally, Dubai is coming to Al Ain.’ There is such a difference in the level of design. Dubai now has to go a step further and other cities should follow,” he says.

Raffles Hotel in Jakarta is another project T’Kint worked on personally. The design itself pays a tribute to Hendra Gunawan, one of Indonesia’s greatest painters.

“It was a very challenging project because the owner has a strong personality, so it took some time and rework to understand his vision. Once we reached that point, it was a very fun job to work on.

“All the colours used within the property were inspired by Hendra’s artworks. To highlight the boldness of such tones, the background tones selected were neutral – in either warm beiges or crisp greys – with the exception of carpets which are vividly colorful. This also applies to the floors, walls and ceilings. The rooms and suites have been toned down with less usage of colours, as their function is to provide a relaxed residential atmosphere.”

TRUST COMES FIRST

When it comes to the design profession, for T’Kint, it is both creative and beautiful, but also extremely subjective.



What you like, I may not like, he says, admitting that he has gradually learned to put his personal taste aside.

“I’m about to start designing a hotel in Edwardian style. I am doing research on that particular era and I will try to reinterpret it my way. It’s not my style, but you can’t walk away from the project just because it doesn’t suit your personal taste. Many young designers when they leave school think: ‘Oh, I’m going to do what I like,’ but it doesn’t work that way,” he says.

With such vast experience in the hospitality market, he now recognises two types of clients. One is a financial investor who understands that the hotel is an investment, so will hire an international design consultant and international operator and let them guide him through

the entire process, because “they know what they’re doing”.

“The second type is the one who thinks he knows everything about design,” says T’Kint. “He is the one that will say: ‘I travelled all over the world, I’ve seen this cool chair here and this cool colour here and I’m going to put it all together.’

“Again, design is a personal taste. I always go back to saying: ‘The brand is this, the story is that, the type of market you’re trying to target is this.’ I try to explain it in a logical manner, but obviously, the client is the end decider.”

He adds that trust is the key to any project becoming successful.

“When you start a project, you know that you will be with a client between two to seven years and it is crucial to

4 The Flavours restaurant in Hilton, Al Ain.
5-6 Subtle references to Emirati’s artisanal culture are presented through the restaurant.
7 Lobby area at Raffles .



build that trust from the beginning, but you have to be pragmatic and practical. The hotel is an investment. Nobody builds hotels because they are beautiful. You design a hotel for a purpose. There is a market behind it. It is always about the money and the return on investment, so we use our professional

expertise to translate clients' or operators' visions. Sometimes nobody has a vision and that is when we come on board," says T'Kint.

NO ONE IS GOD OF DESIGN

Young designers often knock on his door, frustrated with a client and saying

WHO NEEDS A DESK?

In certain ways, hotel operators need to adapt to the way people live their lives. Many of them are now trying to appeal to younger travellers whose behavior is quite different from earlier generations. As technology has become a lot smaller and people are on their iPads and iPhones, some standard features in a hotel room seem to be unnecessary.

"Some operators are now walking away from a desk concept since people don't use them as before," says T'Kint. "They would rather sit on the bed with their iPhones and iPads and watch TV at the same time. I barely use a desk myself. Connectivity is becoming more important as it can provide a more personalised experience, such as the possibility to play the music you have on your phone in your room. But, we have to be careful not to try too much. Overly sophisticated technology can drive the guest nuts. What's the point of technology if guests can't turn on the light themselves? I believe in keeping things simple."



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they should fight for their design.

“And I always tell them they should fight, but in a logical way. If it makes sense, usually the client will buy into it, but if you come with this designer’s attitude it will never work out. To be honest, nobody is a superstar designer and nobody can say: ‘I’m a God of design, this is my design take it or leave it.’

“There are lots of designers out there, so how do you make that difference? It is not just the quality of the design, but the service you provide. Our repeated clients come to us for those two reasons.”

TELLING A STORY

T’Kint believes every project is as unique as the developer and operator, who are typically different and bring new challenges to the table. Location and culture also play a key role in its aesthetic and narrative.

He says: “When we approach a project there is always a story line. It is not a theme, but a concept and we want to make sure that the guests’ experience is consistent all the way through the lobby and corridors to the guestrooms. I’ve been to some hotels where you have a feeling that there is no connection between spaces.”

GUESTS ARE EXPECTING MORE

Working exclusively on hospitality projects, for T’Kint and his team at HBA the question ‘How do you reinvent?’ comes up with every new project.

“People are now travelling more and more, for both leisure and business. Things go so fast these days that every designer has to come up with new features, constantly asking: ‘What else do I have to do to catch their attention?’ It is not about the style and how creative your layout can be; the question is what do you do that makes the clients to come to that hotel?”

And while there is still a lot of work to be done in the Middle East, when it comes to his own career, T’Kint thinks there are still places to be discovered.

“I honestly think that Dubai is not the last place where I’ll be. Every single client, operator or a project brings a completely different experience. For me, it is all part of the bigger adventure,” concludes T’Kint. 

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The Kempinski project in Beirut is an ode and reinterpretation of Lebanese culture.

9 - 10
Design for the Kempinski hotel has a strong, but not too obvious narrative throughout.

READY FOR A REFURB

Catering to the growing mid-tier hospitality sector in the region, HBA launched a Studio division in the UAE a year and a half ago to offer design solutions for small and medium-sized hotels.

T’Kint says: “It is a booming market now, but I wouldn’t agree that the 5-star market is dead. There is a huge amount of hotels, but many of them are now in a phase that they need to be refurbished. A soft refurb is usually done every three years while hard refurbishments come in every seven years. Starting next year, we will have quite a few refurbishments to get ready for Dubai Expo 2020.”

