



GHN PERSPECTIVES

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Renovating historic and modern design icons

Of course all hotels need to be renovated throughout their lifecycle, but the approach to doing so is often not straightforward. When the existing design of a hotel is well-known – and even revered – there are bound to be diverse opinions from fans and critics as to whether the past should be retained or new elements introduced.

The subject of the debate is the same whether the project is a modern icon such as my personal “design landmark”, the Paramount in NYC by the renowned Philippe Starck, or a noble legend such as the Waldorf Astoria in New York, the Ritz in Paris, the Carlton in Cannes or the Dolder in Zurich – although with some of these illustrious luxury hotels, it is not unusual for the previous designers to be unspecified despite the fact that the celebrated ambiance has been attracting guests for ages.

When it comes to traditional historic icons, an interesting example is the famous London landmark, The Savoy (operated by Fairmont) which was completely refurbished just a year ago by ReardonSmith Architects and PYR (Pierre Yves Rochon). The investment was clearly more than would normally be spent on a new-build luxury hotel. In reality, it seems that pretty much everything in the structure was changed or restored, including the façade facing the Thames. And inside, of course, no wall, floor, ceiling or piece of furniture went untouched in some respect.

Yet when I stayed at the hotel just after the reopening, I spoke with an elderly woman who had been taking her tea there for decades – and she was so happy that “nothing had changed”! She appreciated that somehow the atmosphere stayed the same - although nearly all the elements that went into creating this specific version of The Savoy were new. And as a designer from the 20th



century, I agreed - it was exactly what I hoped for in a traditional English luxury hotel. It is lovely!

But then of course other possibilities exist when handling historic monuments. Not far away from The Savoy is “One Aldwych”, where Mary Fox Linton created a classically modern hotel within a traditional shell. This also is a great solution for hotel design, as it has now become a new, absolutely perfect style icon. But the difference is that this historic structure was renovated to create a new hotel that needed to attract a fresh clientele, whereas The Savoy’s loyal guests were predisposed to expect an image of traditional heritage.

There is no “correct” answer when renovating a traditional hotel – it is actually a question of marketing intent. Everything is possible – a cool design in a charming old building can be fantastic, but quite often a classic renovation or even restoration is the right solution for retaining a distinguished atmosphere and long-time guests.

Renovating a modern design icon brings a twist to the debate, as often the original designer may still be working and/or is considered to be a significant influence upon contemporary style. Our design team has worked in the past with Andrée Putman (known as an originator of “boutique” style as first seen in Morgans Hotel) and is currently in discussion to collaborate on the refurbishment of a cherished modern icon previously designed by her practice, the Ritz-Carlton in Wolfsburg. As the last renovation took place eight years ago, the former head of Mme. Putman’s agency is now freshening up its décor to be “à la Putman”... yet the design will also have its own distinct personality.

On the other end of the modern design spectrum is the “Parco dei Principi” hotel in Sorrento, Italy. In the 70s architect/designer Gio Ponti created this space which, since that time, has been kept as a working “museum”. Reception was simply a window in the wall adjacent to the concierge desk, and while yes, the bathrooms did have hot water and a bidet, the design intent still greatly followed the guiding principles of the era – the primary concern was their ability to be easily cleaned.

Having stayed at this hotel for three days on an architectural tour, my craving to be immersed in 70s “luxury” design was utterly satisfied. Although it was inspirational to travel back in time and sip an espresso in the restaurant while being surrounded by strange furniture upholstered with monochromatic fabrics and cubic style wall lamps, as a guest the luxury “comforts” of 40 years ago truly do not match the expectations of travelers nowadays. And from an operational



perspective, it must be a nightmare: no keycards - just big old-fashioned keys, stairs all over the place, solid color fabrics...

So does a design style run its course for being idolized? When does a “modern” design turn the corner and become either passé or “retro chic”? In the case of the Parco dei Principi, will enough architects and designers still adore Gio Ponti so much that they want to stay in a design “museum” without modern comforts? And how long will the owner and operator be happy to substitute and restore FF&E while also having to deal with all the functional restrictions that come with this trip to the past?

As long as this hotel – or any design icon - is successful business-wise, there is no reason to change anything. If the owner is a fan of Gio Ponti and is happy to sponsor a museum, nothing needs to be changed. But if the hotel is just hanging on for survival, then the design has to be adapted to modern times to attract additional guests and solve its functional problems.

...and there are many ways to do this.

The hotel could be adapted so that the atmosphere is kept, but everything else is elevated to current standards, as done with The Savoy. Or a rising design star could be introduced to create a new design icon relevant for today.

Historically, architects, designers and artists work with the language of their times, even when it involves existing buildings. A very obvious example can be seen with the Gothic cathedrals that have been designed with Baroque additions.

Whether this is right or wrong, I don't know. But from a very personal point-of-view (and experience), I don't think that a hotel should be a “museum” where time stands still. Even a design icon needs to be refreshed from time-to-time in order to avoid its death.

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