

HOME & DECOR

SINGAPORE

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JEAN-MICHEL
GATHY
REDEFINES
LUXE SPACES

PROPERTY

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BOLD DESIGNS DONE RIGHT

Guest Editor Nikki Hunt On:

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THE WAY OUR HOMES LOOK

WALLPAPER TRENDS OF 2020
(AND WHAT NOT TO DO)

KEY INFLUENCERS OF
INTERIOR DESIGN

MAY 2020



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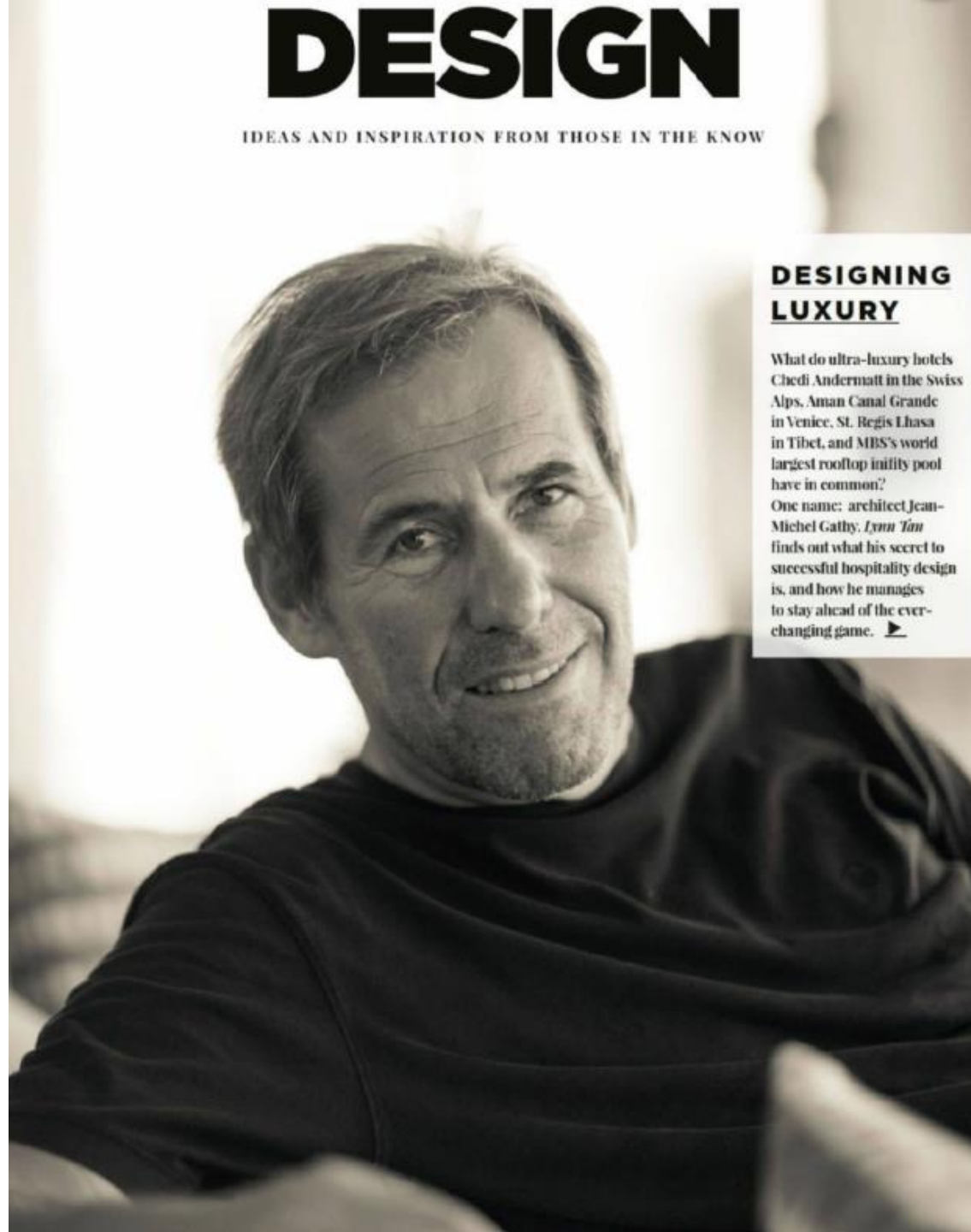
DESIGN

IDEAS AND INSPIRATION FROM THOSE IN THE KNOW

DESIGNING LUXURY

What do ultra-luxury hotels Chedi Andermatt in the Swiss Alps, Aman Canal Grande in Venice, St. Regis Lhasa in Tibet, and MBS's world largest rooftop infinity pool have in common?

One name: architect Jean-Michel Gathy. *Lynn Tan* finds out what his secret to successful hospitality design is, and how he manages to stay ahead of the ever-changing game. ►



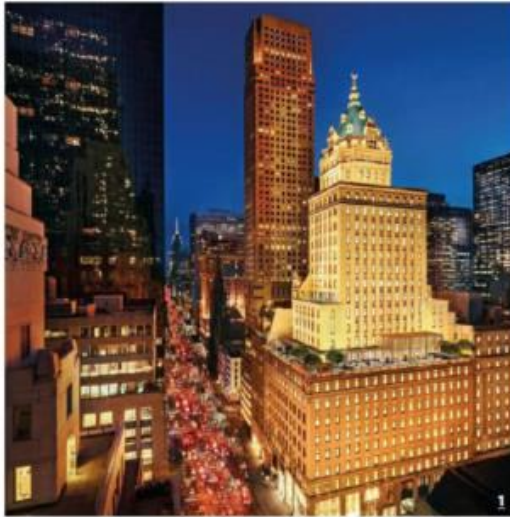
Jean-Michel Gathy has been referred to as the “living legend” of hotel design and he is highly-sought after by luxury hoteliers the world over. Just five years after graduating from Belgium, he founded luxury architectural firm Denniston in Hong Kong. “It was difficult in the beginning, especially for a young foreigner, so I started out doing mainly interior projects,” he recalls.

His first big break came from Adrian Zecha, the founder of Aman Resorts in 1989 and he was exclusively designing Aman and GHM projects across the world for the next decade. Having built a reputation for designing highly-successful luxury resorts, he started getting commissions from top-end luxury brands such as St. Regis, Mandarin, Four Seasons and LVMH among others.

Creative flair

With projects all over the world, Jean-Michel practically lives on an airplane, travelling as many as 220 days in a year. For him, inspiration is everywhere. “I have a very analytical mind—I analyse and study anything and everything that I see or that I come across while travelling. And when you do this continuously from morning to night, you accumulate a huge library of resources in your mind that just emerge when I sit down to design,” he says. Despite having designed hundreds of hotels, he still manages to create something new every time. “Maybe this is what people call creativity.”

Luxury is what you make of it
Jean-Michel measures the success of a hotel or resort



1. Located on New York's Crown Building, Aman New York is scheduled to open this year.

2. The lobby of Aman New York. The hotel is only the second urban location in Aman's collection.

3. Completed in 2010, the design of St. Regis Lhasa in Tibet was inspired by the Sera Monastery and retains some of its site's existing trees.

4. View of the indoor pool at the spa at St. Regis Lhasa.



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by the extent to which it has been designed with the guests in mind. “Many architects design things that they like, but they forget that they should be designing for their guests and not as an ego trip for themselves,” he emphasises.

When it comes to designing luxury resorts for a very discerning clientele, there is no cookie-cutter solution. “Luxury means different things to different people. Some people equate money with luxury, while travelling is a luxury to others. For a banker in New York, time is his luxury. For someone in Hong Kong, space is a luxury. So the notion of luxury is very much dependent on who you are and what you do in life,” he analyses.

For Jean-Michel, luxury means comfort and a successful hotel is one that is comfortable for its guests. However, the definition of comfort varies among different individuals. There is also the issue of having different priorities. “A teenage guest may place high priority on having high-speed and seamless access to the internet, whereas his father considers a comfortable bed the most important. So, the art of designing a good hotel is to ensure that you address most of the desires of your guests”



because it is not possible to address all of their desires," he explains. "The bottom line lies in knowing exactly what type of hotel it is going to be and what sort of clientele you are going to have," he adds.

The nature of luxury is such that people get accustomed to it; what wowed them before becomes the norm and they expect more. The challenge for architects and designers is to be innovative and stay one step ahead. "Coming up with new ideas becomes more difficult as almost everything has been done before, but it all boils down to creativity. We try to create with new materials and new technology, which allows us to execute designs that we could not achieve before," says Jean-Michel.

Designed to see and be seen

With over 40 years of industry experience, Jean-Michel observes a change in the way people see and use hotels. "In the past, a hotel was just somewhere to sleep, but now it is a lifestyle venue where people go to dine or to be seen," he says. To him, a resort or hotel is like "a home away from home". People try to find something that they are familiar with but also provide a change in lifestyle, so the design needs to evolve accordingly. "Lifestyle has influenced the design of hotels and hotels are a reflection of the people who stay in and who frequent them."

This association with lifestyle means that architects and designers need to be more knowledgeable. "Before, it is good enough to design a good hotel room. Now, you also need to design and create



the spaces around the rooms, which encompass music, decor, layering of elements etc.," he points out. There is also a wider palette of materials available, and technology has also made it possible to realise things that were not possible before. Architects and designers need to be in the know in order to be more creative.

Having worked on many hotels in Asia, including the conceptualisation of the world's largest rooftop infinity pool at Marina Bay Sands Singapore, he feels that Asian hospitality is unique in its own way. "In Asian culture, people do not normally entertain guests in their homes, unlike in the West. They prefer to bring their guests to hotels or restaurants, so the image of the hotel becomes very important because it reflects who they are."

The architect and the man

He is currently working on projects all over the world, including a Four Seasons in Tokyo and Bangkok, an Aman in New York, and some exceptional private villas. He couldn't pick a favourite: "Every project is unique in its own way. It is just like my children; they are all different, but I love them all."

He admires architects L.M. Pei for his control of symmetry and geometry, and Tadao Ando for his brutalist style and the pureness of his works. And he considers Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa the father of tropical architecture. What about his own style? "Sometimes dramatic, sometimes intimate, but always charismatic" is how he sums up both the Jean-Michel Gathy style and Jean-Michel Gathy, the man. ■

5. Completed in 1993, Amanwana on Moyo Island in Indonesia was the first of many Aman resorts designed by Denniston.

6. A view to the ocean from the Jungle Cove Spa at Amanwana.

7. Denniston's luxury tent concept takes glamping to new heights even before the portmanteau glamping was coined.

8. The infinity pool with an ocean view at located within the Noonu atoll at the northern part of Maldives.

9. Comfortably rustic materials meet stately scale at Cheval Blanc Randell.

10. The open bath concept at the Cheval Blanc Randell.