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| *Iconoclast* |

Making Waves

Belgian architect and renowned hotel designer Jean-Michel Gathy is tackling a new challenge: creating exclusive residences at sea *By Dan Stapleton*

Few people understand luxury travellers like Jean-Michel Gathy does. In fact, fulfilling the needs of the world's most discerning jet-setters has been this architect's lifelong mission. Since he founded the Kuala Lumpur-based design firm Denniston in 1983, Gathy has helmed revolutionary developments for every five-star hotel brand worth mentioning.

A quick look at his current and forthcoming projects demonstrates the esteem in which he is held. Highlights include Four Seasons hotels in Bangkok and Tokyo, Aman properties in New York and Miami, as well as One&Only resorts in Montenegro

and Dubai. So it makes sense that Gathy has been appointed one of the two lead interior designers for M/Y Njord, a first-of-its-kind residential superyacht that will sail around the world, providing owners with a holiday experience at sea.

The vessel will feature over 100 residences in 21 configurations, from compact two-bedroom apartments to sprawling triplexes with private elevators. Pricing remains confidential, but it's safe to assume that securing a place aboard the superyacht will not be cheap. So, how is Gathy planning to create a sense of genuine luxury for residents? "Luxury is not necessarily linked to hardware," he says.



Clockwise from top left: M/Y Njord is a stylish superyacht featuring 118 residences in 21 configurations; the larger residential units on board the vessel can incorporate a wine room as well as pool areas and a study; Belgian architect and designer Jean-Michel Gathy, founder of Denniston

"Having a gold faucet doesn't make it a luxurious environment. For the world's most successful people, luxury means comfort, and by that I mean what is reassuring. No one becomes successful without suffering so for these people, that feeling of comfort is the truest (sense of) luxury."

According to Gathy, each residence will be like a "sheltered harbour" for its owners. "Whether they get off the ship in Antarctica to see penguins or in Sydney to see koalas, when they come back on board, they are returning home." Larger residences will feature wine cellars, cheese rooms, private gyms, saunas, and more. To enhance the feeling of comfort, Gathy will customise each residence according to personal tastes and preferences. Nothing will be "cookie cutter".

ACROSS CONTINENTS

Gathy's ability to customise each project without alienating luxury travellers is one reason he has become so successful. It means Aman, Four Seasons or any other client can rely on him to deliver



Clockwise from top left: The rooftop area of Aman New York; located along the Chao Phraya River. Four Seasons Bangkok was designed to reflect the dynamism of its waterfront location while providing a restful respite for travellers; Four Seasons Bangkok features 299 guest rooms including suites with garden terraces

properties that are both unique and pleasing to a discerning crowd. He credits his Belgian upbringing. "In my blood, in my instinct, I have the Belgian discipline," he says. "I have the Belgian strictness."

However, he points out: "I left Belgium when I was 25, and I'm 66 in October. That's 40 years I've spent living in Asia." He says the East has given him the freedom to be creative. "I like adventure. I like thinking out of the box. And Asia has allowed me to express myself." He adds: "I'm a bit of a mix between European discipline and logic, and Asian creativity."

FAMILY TIES

This cross-cultural sensibility is readily apparent in Gathy's work for Aman, the Swiss-headquartered hotel brand he is perhaps most closely associated with. He has been designing for Aman since 1993, creating resorts that blend European precision with Asian character. His upcoming projects for the brand include Miami and a trio of properties in Saudi Arabia. But

it is Aman New York, scheduled to open by the end of the year, that is generating the biggest buzz.

Set in the heart of Manhattan, in a 26-storey building that was built in 1921, the hotel consists of 83 guestrooms, 22 private residences and copious amenities. It's a surprise move for Aman, which usually chooses secluded resort locations and not cities. "We had to take the Aman DNA and translate it into the urban context," Gathy says. "So, we asked ourselves: 'What is New York's sense of place?' The answer is energy. New York is cosmopolitan, always moving. It's dynamic and relatively challenging."

As a result, Gathy says the hotel's restaurants and bars are more densely packed and communal than those at other Aman properties. There's also a jazz club and a dramatic 20m indoor swimming pool surrounded by fire pits. "We knew the DNA of Aman, because we have done this for so many years, but the challenge was: 'How do we insert energy?' That's what we did. And I believe it will be a success."

EVOKING EMOTION

Dennison has grown steadily over the years and now employs almost 160 staff, allowing Gathy to work on up to a dozen projects at once. "I am very busy," he says. "I work, on average, 14 hours a day, six or seven days a week. I work a lot. And that's because I design everything, and I design by hand."

He's proud to call himself old-fashioned. "I'm one of those guys who believes that the only way to translate an emotion, a sense of design and aesthetics, is by hand. It's very difficult to be emotional with a computer."

Can he think of a characteristic that defines his oeuvre, aside from its luxury appeal? "A journalist once used the word 'charismatic', which is exactly the style of what we do," he says. "And that's me as a person." The word "charismatic", he explains, means "gift of grace" in ancient Greek. "I'm a little bit of a drama queen sometimes," he adds. "But everything I do will always come from the heart."