

HOMES | ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

Asia's Most Influential: How Jean-Michel Gathy Designs Sublime Luxury Resorts

Words by RENNIER CHOI | August 22, 2022



DENNISTON Architect Jean-Michel Gathy, founder of Denniston

Luxury hotel designer extraordinaire Jean-Michel Gathy talks about designing for Instagram, living in Asia for 40 years, and where he stays when he goes for a holiday

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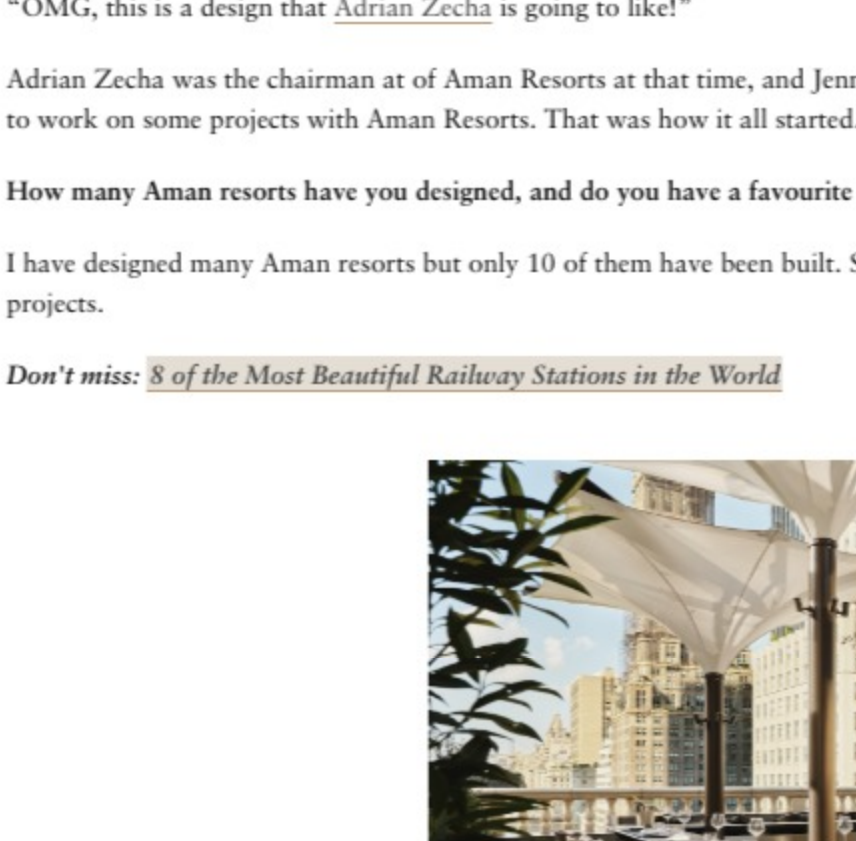
A stay at ultra-luxury [resorts](#) is always the stuff of dreams, and one of the leading architects of these dream properties is [Jean-Michel Gathy](#). A Belgian national, Gathy founded the Kuala Lumpur-based design firm Denniston in 1983 and has been helping to redefine and refine the ultra-luxury resort experience ever since.

With a portfolio that reads like the must-stay bucket list of the world's most discerning jet-setters, highlights include the [Four Seasons](#) hotels in Bangkok and Tokyo, [One&Only](#) resorts in Montenegro and Dubai, and a staggering 10 [Aman](#) resorts, the latest being the much-anticipated first urban [Aman in New York, USA](#).

This groundbreaking project carved out of the fourth to 26th stories of the Crown Building on Fifth Avenue (regarded among the most sought-after real estates in the world) is just another feather in Gathy's cap, who has had a remarkable track history in design by continuously remaining ahead of ever-changing aesthetics.

A Platinum Circle Hospitality Design honouree and a *Tatler's* Asia Most Influential lister, Gathy speaks exclusively to us about luxury and inspiration.

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ABOVE The Crown Building, New York City

How did you come to work with Aman?

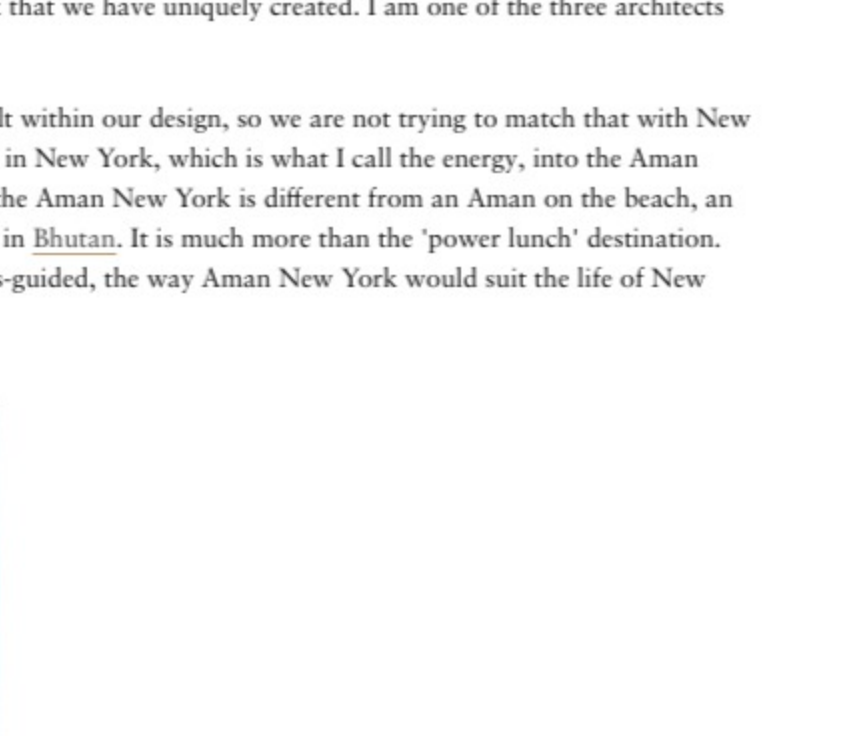
I had designed a project in the [Maldives](#) for a developer at that time when Hans Jenni, the then chief executive of GHM, saw my design. He said: "OMG, this is a design that [Adrian Zecha](#) is going to like!"

Adrian Zecha was the chairman at of Aman Resorts at that time, and Jenni introduced me to him and he loved what I had designed and asked me to work on some projects with Aman Resorts. That was how it all started.

How many Aman resorts have you designed, and do you have a favourite or most memorable one and why?

I have designed many Aman resorts but only 10 of them have been built. Sometimes we make proposals or site visits, so I had designed many projects.

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Aman NY garden terrace bar

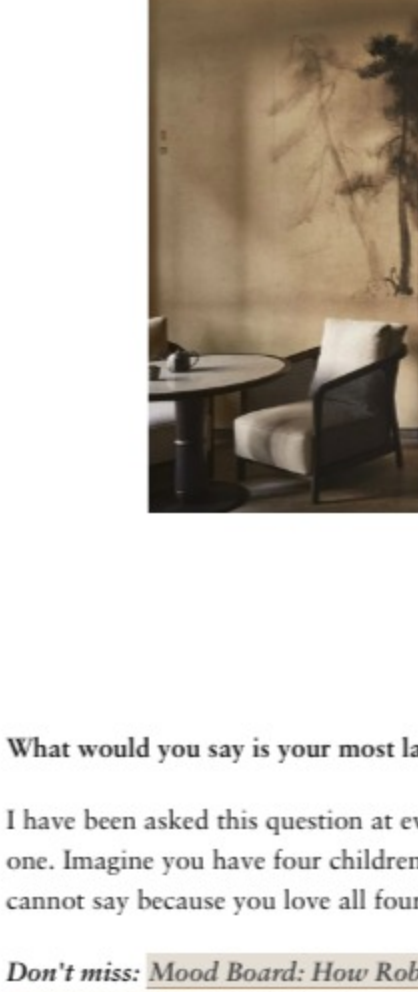
Photo 1 of 3

How did you translate the strong Aman DNA into the first urban Aman resort for New York?

You must understand that the architectural and interior design philosophy of Aman is the look of my work. I do not design to match a look. What you consider the 'Aman look' comes from the architects.

Besides the look, what comprises the 'Aman DNA' is the strategy, the operation, the positioning, the sales and the type of clientele. These elements are part of Aman's DNA which we have not created—that is separate from the design look that we have uniquely created. I am one of the three architects who founded the design of Aman.

We already know the DNA is in-built within our design, so we are not trying to match that with New York. We brought the sense of place in New York, which is what I call the energy, into the Aman design's DNA context. That is why the Aman New York is different from an Aman on the beach, an Aman in the mountain, or an Aman in [Bhutan](#). It is much more than the 'power lunch' destination. It's much more focused and business-guided, the way Aman New York would suit the life of New York.



ABOVE Gathy's latest work for Aman is the latter's first urban outpost in New York City

What is your definition of luxury? Has the definition of luxury evolved since you started in the design industry?

I think there is no single definition of luxury, but really, a matter of opinion. For example, the bankers in New York would define luxury as time. A person in Hong Kong would consider luxury as space. Others will consider luxury as privacy or exclusivity.

For me, the definition of luxury is [comfort](#). Since I believe there is no definition of luxury, but rather many definitions of luxury, I think the way we have progressed over time provides different meanings depending on what you personally consider a luxury.

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Aman Premier Suite

Photo 1 of 5

What would you say is your most landmark project and why?

I have been asked this question at every single interview and I will never answer because I don't have one. Imagine you have four children, and somebody asked you which one you like the most. You cannot say because you love all four of them.

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Does Denniston have a signature style, and if so, how would you describe it?

Our signature style has been defined by someone, so I will just quote him because I think the definition is absolutely right: "Sometimes [dramatic](#) and sometimes intimate, but always charismatic."

This is the best description of our style. Our hotels have elements of drama and glamour, but it is associated with an area where you can have a moment alone with your wife or a place to discuss business and in privacy.

The layering of spaces and the mix of drama and intimacy are exactly our style and within the design philosophy of geometry. I believe that if the geometry is intelligently used, it will be peaceful to the eye. I did not say necessarily symmetry, but rather geometry, which means there must be logic in the options you take.

Chaotic designs, where things are intentionally chaotic by the architects or the interior designer, are unpleasant because they are tiring and you can look at it. You can take a beautiful picture, and it looks gorgeous, but it lasts for two weeks, and people get tired of it. I believe that geometry is what makes a project pleasant and comfortable.

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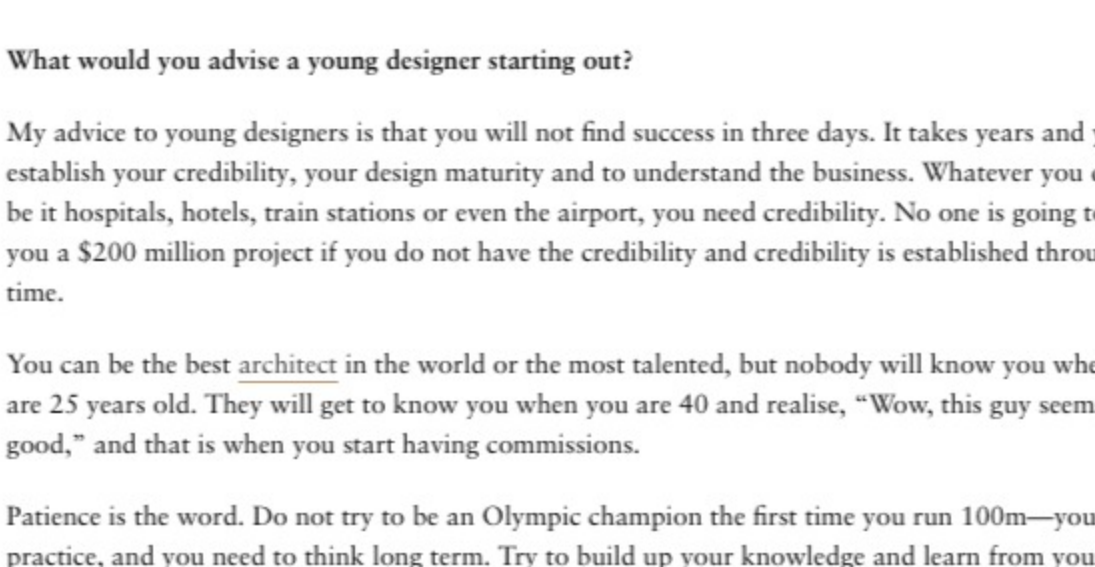
— Jean-Michel Gathy

Has social media changed the way you design? Designers have said that clients are now asking for Instagrammable projects. What are your thoughts on this, and have you been asked to do the same?

Some clients might ask for [Instagrammable](#) projects for purely marketing purposes without a lesser focus on quality. A quality product would be designed with a focus on quality throughout, and you will experience what it offers without needing an Instagram photo.

For example, if you are a great singer, you would want to make sure people love your voice. If you are a great painter, you want your paintings to be loved. You cannot have only one beautiful painting in all your works. Instagram is certainly applicable to some properties, but when designing for the best properties, all elements must be considered.

A proper hotel or a lifestyle venue must be balanced with common sense in terms of operations too. It should not be a succession or juxtaposition of Instagram shots, but it should be a comprehensive, well-put-together product overall.



ABOVE Gathy also worked on the new Four Seasons Bangkok next to the Chao Phraya river (Photo: Instagram/@fbangkok)

You've lived in Asia for over 40 years. How has that influenced you?

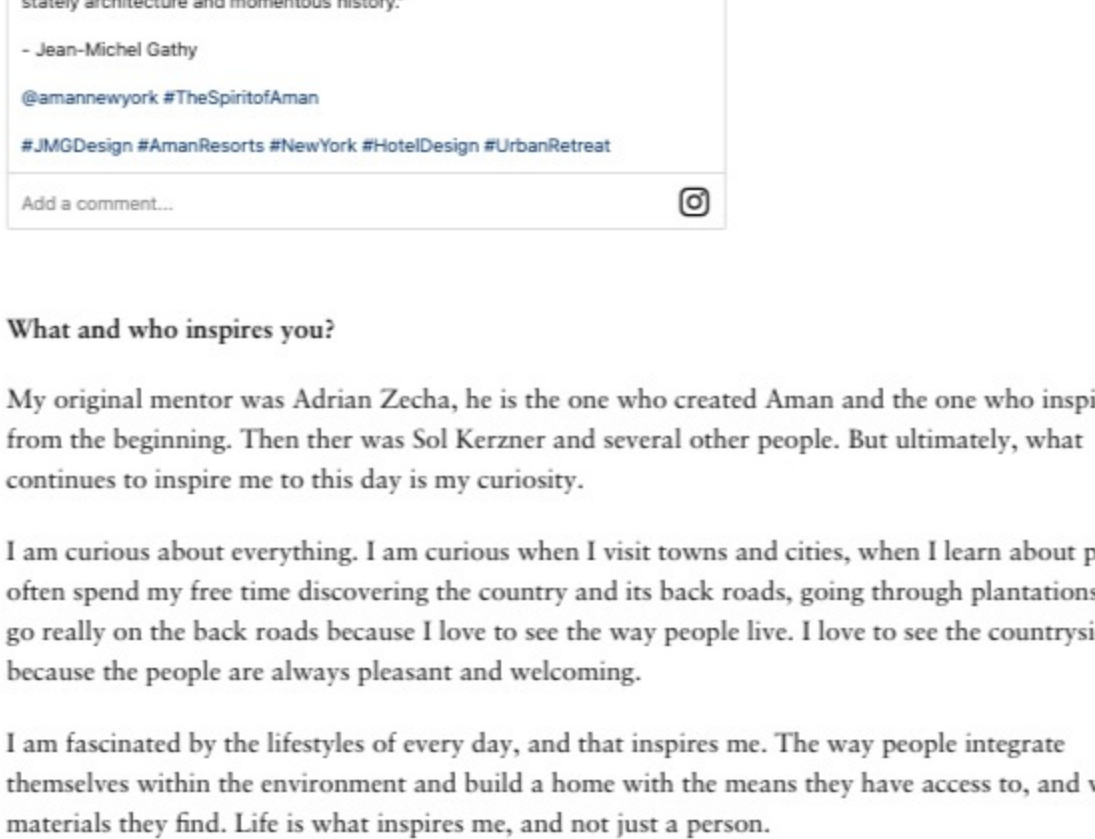
I am now subconsciously mixed between a Westerner and an Asian. I have a very specific new DNA. I would always give the example that in the Western world if you go to a building and when you go from one room to another room through a door, it is black and then white.

In Asia, it is different. We have larger rooms, and the space between one room to another is divided by screens. So Asian style is more layered, whereas the European style is more structured. However, there are always exceptions, and I have that layering in me now.

That layering, of course, reflects in the way we use depth of field, the way we use putting things in evidence or hiding them in the way we approach things, and the dynamic of the circulation. That has influenced me substantially and has also influenced my taste.

My taste has been very much influenced by Asia. I have been living my whole professional and mature age in Asia. I have an Asian wife, and I have an Asian son. I live here, I eat here, I drink here, and I love it. And I love the place where I live, and I am more than happy to have been here for 40 years. It is certainly one thing that I will never regret; otherwise, I would have left a long time ago.

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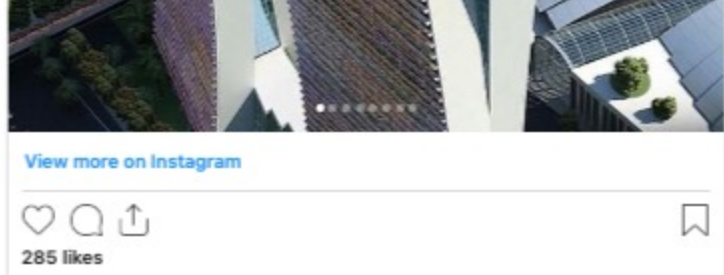
ABOVE One of Only Personel in Montenegro, another one of Gathy's magnificent handwork

What would you advise a young designer starting out?

My advice to young designers is that you will not find success in three days. It takes years and years to establish your credibility, your design maturity and to understand the business. Whatever you design, be it hospitals, hotels, train stations or even the airport, you need credibility. No one is going to give you a \$200 million project if you do not have the credibility and nobility is established through time.

You can be the best [architect](#) in the world or the most talented, but nobody will know you when you are 25 years old. They will get to know you when you are 40 and realise, "Wow, this guy seems good," and that is when you start having commissions.

Patience is the word. Do not try to be an Olympic champion the first time you run 100m—you need practice, and you need to think long term. Try to build up your knowledge and learn from your mistakes. Do not be arrogant about your mistakes because, believe me, I am 66 years old but I still make mistakes. It's incredible.



ABOVE One of Only Personel in Montenegro, another one of Gathy's magnificent handwork

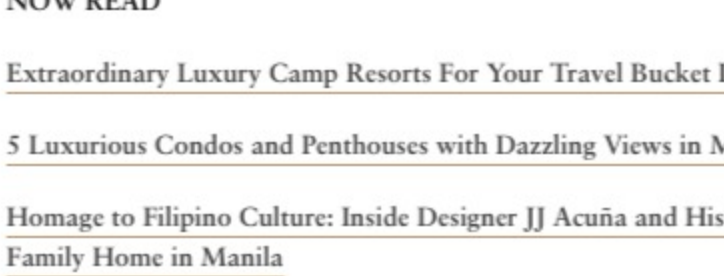
What and who inspires you?

My original mentor was Adrian Zecha, he is the one who created Aman and the one who inspired me from the beginning. Then there was Sol Kerzner and several other people. But ultimately, what continues to inspire me to this day is my curiosity.

I am curious about everything. I am curious when I visit towns and cities, when I learn about people. I often spend my free time discovering the country and its back roads, going through plantations, and I go really on the back roads because I love to see the way people live. I love to see the countryside because the people are always pleasant and welcoming.

I am fascinated by the lifestyles of every day, and that inspires me. The way people integrate themselves within the environment and build a home with the means they have access to, and with materials they find. Life is what inspires me, and not just a person.

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ABOVE One of Only Personel in Montenegro, another one of Gathy's magnificent handwork

Having designed so many resorts, where do you go to relax and have a holiday?

Sometimes, I go on holidays at the resorts I have designed, but because I am an endless auto critic of my work, my wife does not like it, and she says every time my mind gets into the zone of self-questioning and everybody talks to me, and I get quite busy, so I have been trying to avoid going to these places because it does not relax me.

My wife and I love and worship safaris, so we have been on safaris from India to Africa, and many times, that is the place where we can sit for a few hours just looking at the leopard on a tree. For me, that is relaxing.

Doing sports relaxes me too, especially if we go sailing out on the sea. Sometimes we take a yacht on the sea, but it is all about doing something. I do not just go to the beach and look at the sky. If I go to the beach, I will go snorkelling, diving, and fishing—I like my holidays to be active.

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