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Franchising

Comparing Two New Boutiques

Tabletop Trends



Different As Day

Houston's Hotel Derek and Washington's Topaz take design in different directions to compete for business, group and leisure travelers.

By Mary Scoviak, Design Editor

outique chic has been edging dangerously close to becoming formulaic. Fortunately, newly opened hotels such as Houston's 314-room Hotel Derek and Washington, D.C.'s 99-room Topaz have stopped the skid. Both the result of cost-conscious conversion or renovation, these young hotels take design in dramatically different directions to capture 4-star and trade-down 5-star business in markets hungry for alternative hotels.

The four-month-old, 314-room Derek and the 99-room Topaz, which opened last October, define the most significant design trends emerging early in 2002. First, they represent the affordable kinds of hotel projects that can still get done during a slowdown. A former Red Lion Hotel, the Derek could have been mistaken for an office building with dark, institutional interior

spaces. The Topaz's last life was as a small apartment building limited by the lack of architectural detail typical of 1960s design. In both cases, the designers had to find inspiration in decidedly unforgiving shells.

They also share a mandate to create design that is right for the hotel's market, not the mass market. The Derek's designer, Los Angeles-based Powerstrip, and Topaz designer Dawson Design Associates, Seattle, were challenged to style interiors that would appeal to a market mix of business FITs, groups and leisure travelers, but not at the expense of watering down design.

"Our experience with the Hotel George (the Derek's sister hotel) in a conservative market such as Washington, D.C., allowed us to make some basic assumptions about client reception of an alternative but well done, customized proj-



ect,” says David Hill, the Derek’s general manager. “In the case of the Derek, we pushed the design level higher and slightly farther away from the center. Here in Texas, we believe that will work.” As evidence for his optimism, the hotel is at its initial target occupancy in the 50s with rates starting around US\$215 a night despite the aftermath of September 11 and a tough economy.

Topaz, managed by the Kimpton Hotel & Restaurant Group, San Francisco, has demonstrated the power of niche-driven design with 70% occupancy and an ADR of US\$170, according to Regional Director of Sales and Marketing Paige Dunn. “We wanted this hotel to be different from the independents in Washington by giving it a more contemporary design,” says Dunn. “That’s where we saw our niche. Because of our high-end finishes, we felt we could achieve a 10% higher rate than similar hotels.”

Though both hotels have a contemporary visual attitude, both carry through a scripted design theme and both share a commitment to design quality and detail well above expectation; they are as different as day and night stylistically. They represent the two aesthetic camps currently influencing every-

thing from fashion to home furnishings.

The Derek is cool. Recalling the lifestyle of an aging (fictional) British rock star, its interiors marry pin-stripes and Pucci into a modernist setting right for design touches such as the Mies van der Rohe and Jacobsen chairs in the public areas. With a nod to the exotic and baroque, the Topaz heats up design by drawing its inspiration from the sinuous lines and iridescent colors of James McNeill Whistler’s Peacock Room in the Freer Gallery. Playing up these differences boosts the competitive energy of such key areas as food and beverage, meeting spaces and guestrooms.

Hot Versus Cool Bars

Hotel bars are hip again. Designer Andrea Dawson Sheehan and her team combined what was a dismal English pub and an adjacent office into a surreal lobby lounge at Topaz, anchored by accents of royal blue. To counter low levels of natural light, the design team dropped the already low ceiling another 6 ft. (1.8 m.) to conceal recessed low-voltage lighting required for day use. Walls were hand-rubbed with Moroccan-style plaster that extends the color used on the ceiling. At night, the ▶

Design integrates the Derek’s Ling and Javier restaurant with the bar/lounge (left), erasing the dungeon-like feel of many hotel bars and making the area as appealing for single travelers as small groups.

Curvilinear shapes and rich colors enable the Topaz’s 40-seat bar (right) to make a major design statement. In the evening, the space takes on a second life as a nightclub and the lobby becomes a lively social scene.



The Topaz's guestrooms offer the sensual pleasures of all-cotton linen, feather duvets, down pillows and a top-quality bed.

pub/club design, the bar/lounge adjacent to the Chinese/Cuban Ling and Javier restaurant attracts both locals and guests.

"Most of our clients are local," says the Derek's Hill. "Guests have the chance to participate in the social/entertainment life of the local community, rather than just interacting with other travelers. The combination of a specific cuisine and a high-energy bar/lounge makes this an evening venue for a broad audience."

Trends to watch: Lobbies that whet the appetite instead of eating up the design budget; continuous restaurant/bar space; and chic, versatile meeting rooms.

New Guestroom Solutions

mood takes a dramatic turn as constantly changing colored lights wash over the ceilings, reducing the visual line between ceiling and wall.

Since this small space accommodates only 40 seats, the design team needed to derive maximum impact from each element. A sculptural fluted bar painted in silver leaf serves as a focal point. Its circular shape boosts labor efficiency, while the artistic form of the blue and white terrazzo functions as an easily cleaned serving surface. Positioned at the back of the space, a "window" styled from a frosted blue glass box visually adds dimension to the space. Strategic backlighting augmented by limited natural light draws attention to a collection of tactile blue bottles framed under a Moorish arch.

Faced with similar problems such as lack of natural light and uninteresting architecture, Dayna Lee and her Powerstrip team transformed "a dungeon sports bar" into the modern art gallery space that serves as the Derek's restaurant and bar. Blurring the design boundaries between the bar/lounge and the restaurant extends operational flexibility. Open and approachable, the clean, cool lines of the bar are warmed up with red bar stool cushions. The lounge stretches design limits further, edging into a walk down a psychedelic memory lane complete with Pucci-style patterned rugs. A welcome alternative to cowboy bars and traditional hotel

The Derek's guestrooms move past minimalist expectations and monochromes. "These are rooms you want to touch—from the vinyl shoe box rooms to the loft-like 'cashmere-y' room," says Lee. Built-in fixtures physically expand the available floor space, while the generous use of glass surfaces adds a reflective shine. Pinstripes never looked as good as on the duvets that hover above high-end bed linens and abundant pillows. Guests have a choice not only of pillow type but also mattress firmness.

Powerstrip's Stefan Bishop spearheaded custom design of 95% of the Derek's furniture, while his colleague, Latosha, changed the texture of the spaces with luxurious fabrics, unusual accessories and "hero props" (a film term for anything the main characters touch). Despite the high-style look, the designers selected what Hill terms as "commercially viable products, fabrics and materials with durability comparable to normal hotel expectations."

Guests at the Topaz cocoon into a spacious room enriched by ▶

Design makes the first impression in the Derek's guestrooms and suites. In addition to high touch fabrics and finishes, guests are treated to the high tech of interactive cable television with on-demand movies, high-speed in-room Internet and safes large enough to accommodate a laptop.





Iridescent wall coverings and bold carpeting worked to transform a dreary lower level restaurant into the Topaz's jewel box meeting space (left). The custom look of both casegoods and accents gives this small hotel added sales reach for business and social functions.

Seeing red is unusual in meeting rooms (right). The Derek sets off a cool neutral room with lipstick bright leather chairs and a fully wired conference table to attract high-end meeting business.



deep colors and lavish fabrics. Striped wallpaper provides a subtle reminder of Kimpton's Monaco brand, but, more importantly, plays off the red and black stripes of the taffeta window treatments. Where the Derek is sleek, the Topaz is posh. The bed is more of a nest, cushioned by a fanciful upholstered headboard that frames and wraps the guest. Intense color, soft textiles and unexpected furnishing choices such as the curving custom chaise and the folk-art inspired armoire distinguish these rooms from Washington's typically traditional hotel stock.

Next Generation Meeting Space

Dunn estimates that groups generate 30% of the Topaz's business, a big bite for a small hotel. Innovative design answered the clear need for space to serve corporate groups of about 30. "We involved Dawson Design Associates in the development of convertible guestrooms that would feel like a real guestroom or a real meeting room based on the set-up," she says. Use of a dividing acoustic wall dressed with a drapery treatment screens the sleeping area. A full-size television, armoire, mini bar and standard bathroom increase the space's versatility.

Purpose-built meeting space is "intimate, soothing and personal," Dunn adds. Line and color reflect

the Eastern and Western influences that unify the rest of the hotel. Important art accents and innovative lighting treatments answer the hotel's need for rooms that can be used for business or social functions.

The business of business directed meeting room and suite design for the Derek as well. In addition to good design, the Derek's Studio rooms maximize their upsell potential by offering corporate travelers an adjacent office area. "Our Studio rooms and Executive Suites enable guests to customize how they use the room. Business and personal needs can be combined or separated as the guest desires," says Hill.

Color, comfort and custom design, hallmarks of the Derek's rooms and suites, also differentiate its meeting space. Large red leather chairs flank the fully wired conference tables. Incorporated side tables, console tables, lamps and other accessories elevate design and quality standards to those of a cutting edge private boardroom. "Meeting planners clearly understand the intention. These spaces have been well received, as have the ballrooms. After just a few months, the booking pace is exceeding expectations," says Hill. "Many of our travelers are used to having choices like this in other cities. Now they are able to have the choice of an alternative hotel in the United States' fourth largest city." ♦

Study in design

Dramatic design does not stop at the major areas of the hotel. Looking for a mixed client base, the Derek and Topaz put design emphasis from the lobby to the guest bathroom. New ways to make a statement include:

■ **Selling the bath.** Removing heavy-looking vanities and replacing surfaces that are typically tiled with glass updates the Derek's guest bathrooms. A shining white sink, gleaming fixtures and well-lighted mirror are all that is needed to give the space an interesting edge. "We wanted guests to feel beautiful," says designer Dayna Lee.

■ **Optimizing space usage.** Walk-in closets converted into dressing rooms with skirted

ottomans and contemporary dressing tables lend a unique character to the Topaz's guest bathrooms. Other touches that make the space memorable: the black and gold harlequin-patterned carpet, the custom vanity in deep cherry, chrome and black granite and Moroccan wallpaper evocative of the public spaces.

■ **Creating a lobby that whets**

the appetite. Taking advantage of a sunken lobby area to separate registration from the action of the upper level, Dawson Design Associates uses peacock colors, rich textures and opulent fabrics to welcome guests into an urban oasis. Gone are the country club focal table and sofa/chair seating. In its place is a flamboyant iron day bed tossed with silk pillows and swathed in ruby red silk. A polished slate "area rug" leads guests up and away to upper seating and the lounge. The drama sets the tone for what to expect from the rest of the hotel.

The Derek's bathroom incorporates materials that mean luxe now: Gleaming metal, shining glass and rich tile.

