

## INTERVIEW ANDRE BALAZS

As his latest projects – a budget bunk-up in downtown Manhattan, and super-luxurious residences at 40 Mercer – illustrate, Andre Balazs has a versatile approach that makes each project he takes on utterly different from the last. Juliet Kinsman is dazzled by the creations of a hotelier with a Hollywood smile...

**I**t seems fitting that my original timeslot with one of the world's most inspiring hoteliers was rescheduled because the Dalai Lama was in town. As creator of the Chateau Marmont and The Standards in LA, The Mercer and QT in New York, The Raleigh in Miami, and a clutch of exclusive private apartments in Manhattan, André Balazs is certainly someone who has provided his own share of enlightenment. I had high hopes that our meeting up would be as inspiring as his audience with the spiritual leader, and having been treated to a few of his hospitality and design secrets, I wasn't disappointed.

After receiving a call to bump the interview forward a week, I pitched up at André Balazs Properties New York HQ, a bright loft-style space on Lafayette Street, without my Dictaphone. After seconds on a sofa admiring the framed glossy poolside photoshoots set in the Chateau Marmont and quirks such as an antique golden harp, a smiley member of the friendly staff swiftly rustled up a gold micro-recorder and pen and paper. It's an environment not unlike one of the hotels, and in spite of my lack of preparation for the interview I felt utterly at ease as I was ushered into an office, wall-to-wall with design and architecture books, where I was greeted by a dazzling Hollywood smile. A fitting welcome from a man not only dating Uma Thurman, but whose lifestyle is every bit as glamorous

as a leading man. And while showbiz analogies may seem a little déclassé, Balazs himself would probably confess, the comparison is unavoidable.

'The process of creating a hotel involves bringing people together much the way producers did in the past, where a studio would envisage a concept and commission a writer to write a script and then hire a director and a costume designer and orchestrate it and steer it to completion. And that's very much the way we work,' remarks the articulate fortysomething about his approach to his business. Never one to play it safe, Balazs is always careful to tailor a fresh team to each project. His first ambitious foray into hotel renovation and design was somewhat of a baptism of fire, when he bought the Gothicky 1930s' Marmont in West Hollywood, in 1990. Rich in history, but threadbare and world-weary, he transformed it into a sophisticated palace with urban sensibilities, while preserving its heritage. Later that decade, Balazs worked his magic on the Mercer, an original boutique hotel borne from a 19th-century warehouse, slap bang in SoHo, demonstrating a versatility that was at that time unheard of among American hotel development.

'We bring in different designers because each place needs its own language,' Balazs explains about his special formula that sees his team coordinating every element of the project, from start to finish. While his

involvement is all-pervasive, the Balazs empire is by no means choreographed by a control freak. Part of the skill lies in expert delegation. 'I always feel like I have too much to do, but yes, my projects are very collaborative. There are so many layers – that's its appeal, it's very complex.'

Each project is utterly unique; when Balazs turned his hand to the Standard he created a whole new mould for stylish sleepovers. Its retro 60s lines, prints and contemporary hi-tech trims were a far cry from the sumptuousness and the dark monochrome palette of the Mercer, which had opened the previous summer. Having enlisted Shaun Haussman, the brains behind New York's Area nightclub, for the Standard, it was clearly never going to be anything conventional. As Balazs remarked at the time, 'It has elements of a club. It's a fun place to hang out.' Another Standard followed in 2002, downtown, and now he has Manhattan all in a tizz again over his budget bunk-up, 140-roomed QT. While the intention was to create affordable lodging (they even offer a 25 per cent discount to under-25s), there's been no scrimping on the artistic input, and as with all of his properties, even as another is added to the portfolio, there is never a whiff of corporate America. 'It was envisaged as a European-style youth hostel but for the American market,' he explains. There's no restaurant (although room service will bring food from other eateries), and

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"I've always felt a  
greater affinity with  
Europe than America.  
It's something I've  
always wanted to do."

Photo © Elfie Semotan

“Balazs feels a hotel’s soul should be entirely at one with its location. In a climate where every possible travel-related consumer hankering has been commodified or catered to, Balazs is careful to celebrate what travelling means.”

the emphasis is on the quality of beds and bathrooms. The reception (staffed by an Uma-like, coincidentally, on my visit) doubles as a news-stand and confectioners, and a view into the DJ-soundtracked swimming pool on a mezzanine level is the tableau that greets you as you enter the hotel and find your way to the buzzing lobby bar.

It’s the insistence on individuality that ensures Balazs’ ventures stand out from the crowd. He feels that all too often architects think ‘that’s how we did it last time’ and they roll out the same blueprints again and again, bypassing the shaping and design concept and the layers and layers of content and materials that Balazs prides himself on upholding. In an era where consumers increasingly have an appetite for originality, he acknowledges that it’s just as important in his own industry. ‘It’s disturbing to go to Milan and realise there’s no unique Prada that you can buy, but most retailers are now starting to recognise this and are correcting it, such as Swatch who sells watches you can only buy in certain locations. Despite the worldwide dissolution I think a hotel is very much like that.’

Balazs feels a hotel’s soul should be entirely at one with its location and, as anyone who’s sipped a Martini on a barstool in QT a stumble from Times Square or supped amid models and fashion designers in the Mercer will testify, he’s a master at making sure that the neighbourhood is complemented in every inch of its fabric. In a climate where every possible travel-related consumer hankering has been commodified or catered to, Balazs is also careful to celebrate what travelling means – going somewhere

different. ‘One of the great luxuries today is travel, so the idea that you travel a certain distance and you end up in a hotel which bears resemblance visually or in attitude to the city you’ve just left, to me defeats the point of travelling,’ he muses. ‘So I think a good hotel captures the soul of where it’s at.’ And, as for when you step foot in the hotel, Balazs feels the key to your experience is a sequence of events that unfold or moods that are caused. ‘The first is a sense of security and safety, from the approach, to how you come in. With the Mercer you walk into what feels like a living room and you see a front desk and there’s something vaguely familiar. The result of that is you let down your guard, and then after that it should give you some sort of surprise.’

The newest addition to the Balazs portfolio of hip hideaways will be a Standard in the meatpacking district amid a city park project that involves the pedestrianisation of the disused railway. ‘The railroad will go right through the building – it’s quite dramatic and it’s a very unique neighbourhood.’ When Balazs opened his first Standard hotel in Los Angeles in 1999, it was a response to the fact that all of the creative ideas in hotels were manifesting themselves in very high-end luxury hotels. The Standard was his attempt to create affordable hotels, with what he calls content. While doffing his cap to the vast improvement in hotels lower down on the room-rate spectrum, he bemoans design becoming less and less meaningful. ‘People always misconstrue decorating to be design,’ he laments. And as many upmarket hoteliers would when waxing lyrical on this topic, Balazs references the W hotels. ‘They are really sharp hotels, but the

idea that you decorate it differently and it constitutes something else...’ Well, to André, it’s still a Sheraton. ‘It’s irrelevant whether a sofa is in leather or in fabric, has two legs or four, those are stylistic flourishes. What’s important is the underlying design, the programming, the way it’s run and the way it’s conceived,’ he asserts. ‘You can imagine a very sexy hotel being very simple in its lines, or being Rococo and over-the-top – it doesn’t matter what it looks like. I think one of the big things that has happened in the industry is an enormous confusion between good design and decoration.’

None of us are strangers to the deception of wide-angle-lenses and digital retouching, and Balazs points out that the huge difficulty for the consumer now is that most places photograph the same way – it’s nearly impossible to distinguish between one internet snap of an all-white city hotel bedroom and another. ‘On top of that, the travel journalism is also problematic,’ he sighs. ‘The young sophisticated writer will go to a new Park Hyatt or the Ritz Carlton and the text that they send back makes it sound indistinguishable from the writing that emanates from a much more eclectic boutique hotel – the same adjectives are used. There’s a devaluation of the language both written and visual.’ He picks over one of the omnipresent supposed signifiers: luxury. ‘In my book, the word ‘luxury’ and the 300-room hotel don’t belong together. It can mean to some people ‘fancy’ – gold faucets, etc – but I’m not sure it means anything.’ To this sophisticated sybarite it is a form of comfort, ‘where things have been anticipated for you – just being able to relax and let someone else think of your needs to the point

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