

# News clippings

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**Redesigning luxury : Hotel developers and their architects are searching for innovative ways to cope with the economic crisis, reports Geoffrey Eu**

## [Redesigning luxury](#)

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As the economic malaise spreads to every corner of the globe, conspicuous consumption – especially in the luxury-lifestyle segment – has dried up faster than you can say ‘credit crunch’. Luxury goods and services have been among the hardest hit as the markets for designer goods, luxury travel and high-priced vacation properties have suddenly dissipated, while a significant proportion of new hotel and resort projects in many countries has either been cancelled or put on hold.

Bright and airy: An indoor outdoor room at WOHA Architects’ Alila Villas Uluwatu project in Bali with furniture custom-designed around Indonesian traditional forms (above). The cavern of light at Dubai Corridor by Mr Seah’s MOD is made up of a multitude of fibre-optic strands. The Koh Samui Lounge Deck View, also by MOD, where each luxury villa is an artful ensemble of airy sunlight-dappled portals that resemble modern salas.

Even as occupancy rates drop and revenues plummet, hotel developers and their architects are searching for innovative ways to cope with the situation – in particular, how to gain a competitive edge by distinguishing their luxury product from the rest.

It’s no longer sufficient to simply flash the cash and follow an outdated policy of pursuing excess. Well before the current financial meltdown, high-end hotels from big urban brands to individual boutique properties had started to take a different approach to hotel and resort design – one that appears to be more appropriate for the times.

**Luxury per se is a bad word these days,’ says Sim Boon Yang, a partner of architecture firm Ecod, which has several hotels and resorts under its design belt, including The Metropolitan in Bangkok, W in the Maldives, The Four Seasons in Phuket and Naumi in Singapore. ‘What is clear now is that people are looking for a new value system – the trend is to hark back to basic values, create a personality for a place so that it can be differentiated.’**

**He adds: ‘The smaller establishments will be quick to adapt to the situation. With the bigger hotel brands I’m working with now, the concept is how to make a property feel as intimate as possible – these brands have cottoned on to the fact that boutique hotels do it best.’**

### **Smaller looks**

**Designers can make a property look smaller than it actually is by breaking up the lobby to make it smaller, for example – the smaller scale appeals more to consumers these days, he says.**



**‘Previously, the brief with resorts was more about pure luxury and maintaining brand standards, but people were lazy about crafting the property to make it unique, with its own storyline,’ says Mr Sim.**

**Among his current projects is a resort hotel on a private island off Abu Dhabi, with plans to include animals and game birds for hunting. ‘You must have that environmental, sustainable aspect woven into the hotel’s selling point – apart from the architecture and the interiors, the packaging of the total experience of a luxury resort is very clearly a pattern that’s emerging.’**

**As for hotel design, there are all sorts of solutions, without having to revert to the full-on fantasy recreations that were the rage in places like Dubai, says Mr Sim, who adds that the Abu Dhabi project is a modern abstraction of local culture, with certain Arabic influences. ‘Where the design direction of the last few years has been characterised by a move towards more elaborate details and statement-making flamboyance, this is now changing,’ he says. ‘Design is undergoing a form of detox,’ says Mr Sim. ‘Luxury in hotel and resort design will be defined by concepts of purity, authenticity and simplicity – new-minded clients understand and desire this concept of ‘barefoot luxury’.’ His firm will strive to borrow from natural organic forms, for example – such as a roof form inspired by an organic cluster of boulders by the sea.**

**There is also a need for discreet and private indulgence in the form of intimate spaces that suggest calm and introspection, he adds. ‘Spaces will focus on the enhancement of the natural setting, be it framing the iconic view or being close to earth and water.’ As for that ‘total experience’, hotels will incorporate locally sourced material and indigenous culture, while materials will include sand-blasted timber and a hand-chiselled stone finish – ‘a natural material palette that suggests a lived-in comfort that is chemical-free’.**

Environmentally sustainable design is also high on the agenda for local firm WOHA, which touts one of its latest hotel projects – the soon-to-open Alila Villas Uluwatu in Bali – as an example of successful integration of vernacular architecture, contemporary detailing and the natural environment.

Hotel development is very cyclical, says Richard Hassell of WOHA. ‘Each cycle, something changes – technology, politics and norms – and the hotels change with them.’ He adds that the previous cycle in Asia was in the early 1990s, when architects started looking at traditional architecture as a source for contemporary resorts.

**‘The Amanresorts brand pioneered this approach, together with the boutique resort and resort-villa mix,’ says Mr Hassell. ‘This approach then moved into both big branded chains and individual local developers – the focus was on luxury and consumption, and the holiday as a taste of the high life.’ Resort spas, which did not exist before, appeared towards the end of the 1990s.**

According to Mr Hassell, the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 put a huge damper on resort development until around 2004, when the lifestyle experience was created and where guests

were encouraged to tailor their individual resort experiences. 'The current crisis has resulted in a definite slowdown in new resorts and the travel industry is likely to suffer severely over the next year or two,' he says. As a result, sustainability will become an essential element in the hotel development process.

### **Less bland style**

'Sustainability can be social, economic as well as environmental, so hopefully we will see a less bland international style and more emphasis on how a resort interacts with the place – taking into account the physical climatic and social environments,' says Mr Hassell.



'We think our Alila Villas Uluwatu is one of the first of this next generation. The design is inspired by Balinese architecture but it also refers to (iconic Western architects) Carlo Scarpa and Mies van de Rohe, so it is a dialogue between local and global and how the two might fuse to make something that is contemporary.'

He adds: 'Stone walls use the stone dug from the site. The design is Green Globe 21 certified and incorporates green strategies from site planning to services to architecture to long-term operation. The landscape uses all local plants, grown on site in a nursery but planted in a very exciting contemporary way. The furniture is designed specially for the project, using motifs from traditional Indonesian arts and crafts.'

One by-product of a slowdown in the economy is that designers have more time to design, says Chan Soo Khian of SCDA Architects, another prominent local design firm. 'When our clients are in less of a hurry, it gives us an opportunity to revisit the design and make it more sustainable,' says Mr Chan. 'It also allows architects to turn their skill sets to something different, such as industrial and furniture design.'

### **Wait-and-see game**

SCDA also designs the interiors for some of its hotel projects, which span the world from Egypt to India and the Maldives to Bali and the Bahamas. 'The crisis cuts across continents and the first reaction for developers is to wait and see, and this is when architects can focus more on product design,' he says. 'Doing a hotel is the ultimate vehicle for designing everything from candle holders to lamps to tableware.'

As for hotels, Mr Chan says that over-lavish designs are definitely out. 'It's not frugality, but a less conspicuous offering,' he says. 'The trend is to go more local – the whole idea of designing an eco-friendly hotel goes beyond the usual things like using local materials – it's a matter of the resort growing from the earth up.'

For Colin Seah, design director at Ministry of Design (MOD), the bad economy means that 'normalcy has returned, compared to the craziness before' when his firm was inundated with work. Now that some projects have been delayed, he is able to focus on doing something really special. 'It's a careful balance,' he says. 'You still need to test ideas and the best way is through real interaction with great clients. For me, it allows me the time to find something more unique in design.'



He adds: 'These bad times aside, designers need to be more long-term in their perspective. We need to redefine what true value is and what it isn't. The ostentation of the past must give way to values that are more fundamental and less shallow.' Mr Seah says that where before he was working at a pace that was unsustainable, now he can concentrate on producing architecture that reaches a higher level.

Current MOD projects include a gentlemen's club in Dubai. 'We had to re-imagine what luxury in a space could be without robbing it of a sense of drama and delight,' says Mr Seah, who created a fibre-optic 'cavern of light' that weaves in practical needs with a major wow factor. 'In Koh Samui, we are working on a very special project where luxury and nature are fused,' he says. 'The design of these very high-end villas is based on the Thai sala, or covered pavilion – the breezes and views become the key feature in an architecture that is very pared down and minimal.' He adds: 'Luxury here is about celebrating the basic elements like the sea, the wind and the sun.'

Crisis always acts as an accelerator of trends, and the current downturn is no exception, says Claus Sendlinger, CEO of Design Hotels, which publishes an annual guide to independent hotels that focuses on architecture and design and feature firms like the ones mentioned above. 'The handbag bubble has burst and everyone is now talking about the reduction of artificial luxury – now it goes back to craftsmanship and a more classical approach, no more gimmickry,' says the Berlin-based Sendlinger, who was in town recently.

Consumers will still spend money but get better value, he says. 'People are tired of mediocrity and exchangeable products. In design, it just needs to be simple and – if there's a function behind it – intuitive to operate.' He adds: 'Leave the unnecessary stuff out, look for natural materials that age well and be responsible with resources – then you will have a winner.'

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