



By Gerit Quealy

Boutique Mystique

VICE PRESIDENT OF DESIGN MARI BALESTRAZZI EXPLAINS THE ALCHEMY BEHIND THE DESIGN PARTNERSHIPS AT THE MORGANS HOTEL GROUP.

When Ian Schrager invited Andrée Putman to join his new venture on Madison Avenue in Midtown back in 1983, the marriage of Schrager's space and Putman's sensibility was a match made in hotel heaven. The progeny they produced, labeled the first "boutique hotel," was soon emulated around the world. At the Morgans, Andrée Putman, the formidable French designer who has lent her unerring eye for style to everything from spas to silverware, bypassed the commercial, creating instead a new aura for the overnight traveler: intimate, casual, comfortable, chic.

Mari Balestrazzi, vice president of design at the Morgans Hotel Group, is leading the new look of the brand in partnership with a who's who of high-profile designers. MHG recently re-opened The Mondrian in Los Angeles (left) with a high-style redesign by Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz.





After updating her original concept in 1996, Putman once again revisited her design as part of a \$9-million renovation, which reopened in September. And since that first pairing—Putman and the Morgans—the family has grown. Morgans has become Morgans Hotel Group (MHG), with some pretty illustrious siblings: the Delano, the Mondrian, and the Sanderson (in London), to name but a few.

These properties have required some careful attention and some new high-profile partnerships to ensure the brand's high caliber design ethic. Enter Mari Balestrazzi, the new vice president of design at MHG. In her scant two years with the Morgans family, she has overseen the design doings at the Delano in Miami, and Mondrian hotels in Scottsdale, South Beach, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas, as well as some new properties on the hotel horizon. "It's been a whirlwind," she admits breathlessly.

Balestrazzi brings her own perfect marriage of experience to the mix: She arrived in New York in the late 1990s with an M.A. in architecture from Harvard, only to find that the primary employment was in designing interiors. Balestrazzi was quick to adapt to the situation: "I thought, let me learn from someone who does this really well and is passionate about it," she says. "If I'm going to be doing interiors anyway, I'm going to work for a fabulous interiors firm."

So she signed on with Thomas O'Brien at Aero Studios and never looked back. "I loved the scale and the directness, the materiality—creating interior spaces, in the end, has much more of a human component, where people really interact with what you're designing."

Her time there also gave her a unique profile in the marketplace, someone with high-end residential experience (for example, Giorgio Armani's New York residence) coupled with commercial expertise (specifically hotel, with 60 Thompson). "It was really from day one, soup to nuts on this hotel—we designed every stick of furniture, we designed all the interior spaces, we even ended up modifying some of the exterior architecture," she says.

Balestrazzi parlayed this expertise into a stint with the St. Regis brand before ending up with what may be the most perfect fit at MHG—a collection of boutique hotels with a high-end residential feel. Design innovation is moving at full throttle throughout the brand, including a new hotel in Chicago with Royalton re-designers Roman & Williams and a project in Dubai. Balestrazzi has been at the forefront of the selection process for many of the new design pairings, even while participating in the ongoing partnerships already in place—making her the doyenne of design harmony at MHG.

Benjamin Noriega Ortiz translated MHG's "hotel as theater" tagline into his dramatic design of the Redbar at the Mondrian Scottsdale.

Here Balestrazzi speaks to the alchemy behind what makes some of these partnerships successful:

Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz and the Mondrian Scottsdale (3, 8) and Los Angeles (6)

"Scottsdale was sort of the first project after the Philippe Starck era, so I think MHG was still looking for a designer with a whimsical quality to his work. One tagline for the company is 'Hotel as theater' and Benjamin has a very theatrical approach. Who better to bring in that layer of fun, that whimsy, the unexpected? And he did such a marvelous job, despite time and budget constraints. Benjamin became such a great partner, so he was a natural fit to bring that kind of ethos to the Mondrian in L.A. He really understands where we're trying to go, bumping up the level of quality and the level of luxury, but still retaining the core essence of who we are. At the opening in September, everyone was thrilled with the results, very much in keeping with what the Mondrian has always been—fun and a wonderful backdrop to the Hollywood lifestyle, but elevated from what it was before."

Tim Andreas and the Delano (1, 4) and Skybar at the Mondrian L.A. (5)

"Tim has a long history with Morgans so he was an obvious selection because he really understands the importance of the Delano as the kind of jewel in the crown. There was a hesitancy to hand that over to anyone other than someone we loved and trusted. He went in to all the guest rooms, refitted the bedrooms, completely changed the design—the quality, the level of luxury, the technology—without changing the original concept. It's still an all-white room, and that takes a certain level of care and precision. I don't think people who haven't been there in years would notice the difference, but the spirit is still completely fresh. Tim is also doing some redesign for us at the Blue Door there and the SkyBar at the Mondrian in L.A. There's a lot of cross-pollination."

Marcel Wanders and the Mondrian South Beach (2)

"Marcel was chosen to work on the Mondrian in South Beach because of the creativity and sheer magnitude of his talent. His work is cerebral, but also incredibly playful and a bit surreal. We thought, 'What better marketplace for something completely new?' He's really well known in Europe, but not as well known here, so we're very excited about the December opening. Even still, we weren't able to accommodate the scale of what he likes to do. So when we considered the project in Las Vegas—an 800-room hotel on the Strip, we just thought, 'This is an opportunity for all of us!' He's not only a creative genius but also just a wonderful person—really easy to work with. Marcel has a larger-than-life approach to design, and this is a perfect canvas for his vision."

Andrée Putman and the Morgans (7)

"Everyone loves that design—it was just such a high point and the design was so unique. People have grown to adore that hotel over the years, so we weren't looking to do a radical shake-up, but it needed to be rethought. That's what was so much fun about going in with the original designer. It was almost like turning the dial 7 degrees to the right—from a warm '80s palette to a cooler, more modern palette. The grays have changed. The shapes have changed. The tailoring is crisper. There were fun opportunities, like having a signature chair, in lacquered aluminum, produced by Emeco—the Morgans chair by Andrée Putman. The original fabric selection was like an Armani suit, chic in its flat, detaillessness; now there's texture or a luminosity that wasn't there before. The work is so subtle. It was fun to do, and so radically different from so many of our other projects."

