



# First impressions last

Design elements which “take the breath away and create delight from the unexpected” are a feature of the W Retreat and Spa Bali

No matter how good the treatments themselves, the visual impact of a spa has the power to make or break it, believes *Catharine Nicol*



Indigo Pearl Phuket's Coqoon Spa consists of two woven 'nests' within the branches of a 100-year-old banyan tree



The W Retreat and Spa Bali's outdoor lounge

While it is generally acknowledged that a beautifully designed spa doesn't necessarily mean a wonderful spa treatment, there's no getting away from the fact that the visual impressions of the spa can help make or break a spa experience. While this first impression can cement the concept of the spa in the guest's visual memory, it also has an effect on their mood and attitude, even to the extent of lifting or dashing expectations, and having a potential impact on how they receive the treatment itself.

Of course spa designers wouldn't be in such demand if the psychology of the spa experience weren't so important, and affected by the design. Art has long been relied upon to elevate the human condition, and if a spa is trying to achieve anything, surely it is this – to take the guest away from the humdrum of their schedules and transport them to a place where they can relax, connect and find some albeit temporary peace.

Trends within the spa industry are as significant as they are in any other, and spa architects and designers are continually looking to break barriers and reveal something fresh and unexpected with their next spa. But how do you do this in Asia,

where the competition is at its fiercest?

Kate and Paul Greenwood of studiooaria, designers of the new Elemis Spa at The St Regis Bangkok, created the unexpected in that generally most functional of areas, the changing room. Enhanced out of all recognition, at the Elemis Spa the two-storey, light-bathed area is memorable for its design and sheer amount of space, encouraged by hotel owner Bill Heinecke who wanted guests to spend serious time here. "Changing rooms traditionally aren't actually an afterthought, but don't hold the important role they deserve," says Paul Greenwood. "The two storey idea came in, with full height glazing bringing in the advantage of an unexpected Bangkok view. We were really experimenting with space. It's very generous – deliberately designed to feel generous so you'd want to spend the whole day there."

### Tangible extravagance

Alongside time, space is the new luxury. Especially for urbanites, it's an almost tangible extravagance, allowing the spirit as well as the body to stretch out and grow. Within the huge area the Greenwoods have created spaces within space, curvy wicker pods looking down over the pool

and wet area, which leads up to showers, changing area and beautifully lit dressing tables upstairs. "This also gives a level of intimacy," says Paul. "You're not on view, you're cocooned really, hence the pods and little surprises."

At the just launched W Retreat and Spa Bali, it's the AWAY Spa's entrance, with its 'wishing walk' under a water ceiling leading to a flowing reception desk that takes the breath away and creates that delight from the unexpected, especially when guests arrive at night. "The blue water ceiling is reflected on the ceiling and floor giving the impression that you're literally surrounded by water," says Adria Lake, founder of A.W. Lake Spa Concepts. "The wishing path sets you on your way mentally, via messages on the walkway. It's very W, very whatever/ whenever. And then you walk inside and the reception desk is delightfully whimsical. It's the flow again; everything flows. There's no ending and no beginning."

What is also unexpected is that neither of these spas display the typical Thai or Balinese interiors you'd expect in those locations. At Indigo Pearl in Phuket, where Coqoon Spa by renowned landscape architect and designer Bill Bensley has recently won yet another award, it is The



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Bill Bensley**

Nest that is garnering most of the attention, another totally unexpected spa treat. Two woven nests hang within the branches of a 100-year-old banyan tree. Climb the steps and step inside for a treatment within the spherically woven space and you do literally feel like a bird.

“Initial ideas always come from Mother Nature,” says Bensley. “When one can read her well, ideas rarely fail. The weaver bird of Thailand has a nest with an identical shape.” When asked if he felt like a bird following a treatment within his nest, Bensley replied with his signature humour, “Very much so. When finished, the hunt for bird seed was exhausting!”

And strangely enough, he’s not wrong. It’s a singular, and absolutely comforting, experience and one is reminded of his belief in the Indonesian saying, “lebih gila, lebih baik”, meaning “the odder, the better”. There’s something particularly cosy and yet intimate about the weaving of the walls. They feel as if they are alive, living, breathing. “For me, it is about being cradled



The Elemis Spa offers spaces within space, with curvy wicker pods looking down over the pool and wet area



in a 100-year-old banyan tree,” he adds.

Textures have always been significant within spa design. At the recent Global Spa Summit 2011, one of the spa industry’s most influential annual events, Emmanuelle Linard, executive director of Edelkoort an industry trend forecaster, declared that within the spa design world, textures were all-important, and white, the colour of spirituality and peace, would feature strongly. She may as well have been talking about Elemis Spa, with its soft, off-white palette, diffused light and magnificent textures, the white leather in reception in particular giving a luxurious feel. “We very deliberately used a soft white – not clinical white,” says Kate Greenwood. “It’s about moods,” continues Paul. “It allows the spa to change in terms of character throughout the day.”

From white to futuristic blue. The W always does things a little differently and for Lake the colours and texture subtly communicate the concept behind the spa. The sleek treatment rooms – or stages – glow from the light emitted from the extraordinary, almost neon treatment beds, and provide a contrast to the textured silver-gold wall, which reflects a different, living, flowing colour, depending upon which direction you approach it. Blue representing water, and the textures conveying wind playing on the surface of that water, belie the spa’s Balinese roots, yet far from the typical



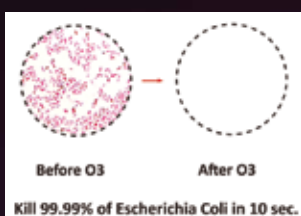
teak and batik interiors of the competition.

“Why would W’s spa be like any other?” asks Lake. “And yet Bali is in everything else – the way the treatments are delivered and within the therapists – to me that’s more meaningful than trying to imitate Bali. This is more of a challenge. The environment may not say Bali, but the experience should. We’re treating people as intelligent beings, it doesn’t have to be so obvious. Let’s make them think and explore, make them ask questions. Then they become more engaged.”

The sense of place at Elemis Spa is also subtle; it’s in the views looking out to an unexpectedly green part of Bangkok, through a recurring Thai inspired frame that cocoons the whole building. A softening effect, the screen has charm as well as function. “It unifies the spa with the hotel as a whole,” says Kate.

And back at The Nest, the natural, curvy space is far removed from the industrial chic of the rest of the resort and spa, but for a few contrasting details that link the elements together. A bird’s nest with industrial piping anyone? Most certainly the odder, or most unexpected, the better. **AHCT**

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