

spa SPACE

writer Kate O'Brien

When reaching the Zen-like states that spas aim to achieve for their guests, it's easy to forget the work, engineering and design that goes into making something so incredibly perfect look so effortless. But from conception, installation, engineering, lighting and design, to the intricacies of installing the magnificent range of hydrothermal offerings that have become *de rigueur* in spas, this fronts a highly sophisticated process for a very niche market.

Nothing seems too much for designers today. Whether it's on a polluted city centre street or in the midst of fragrant rice paddies, with each new spa the benchmark is being notched up, thanks to the artistic genius of a clutch of highly talented architects, interiors experts and landscape designers.

INTERIOR DESIGN

SENSE OF PLACE

A prerequisite for all spas is that they are a fitting reflection of the local culture, and Barcelona's Mandarin Oriental is most definitely at home in one of the

world's exceptional design cities. Under the direction of award-winning Spanish designer Patricia Urquiola, the hotel reflects the open, cosmopolitan character of this great Mediterranean city. "Paseo de Gracia is, in my impression, the centre of Barcelona and the hotel is in the most expressive part of it. The Cerdà Eixample neighborhood, near Gaudí's Casa Milà and Casa Batlló, are places where the 19th Century Catalan heritage, the soul of Barcelona, is easily perceived," says Urquiola. A minimalist but edgy metallic aesthetic is evident throughout the spa with dark wood detailing, black ceilings, white floors and the organic look of wet stone predominant. Metallic curtains lead guests to each of the eight spacious treatment rooms, where sophisticated period appliqué contrast with the overall

simplicity of the space. In the pool area, a large malachite-green screen hides the Hammam from view.

Revealing this crucial sense of place is at the very heart of Asian-based companies like Six Senses Spas and Banyan Tree whose thoughtfully executed spas can be found dotted through this expansive region from secluded islands to rainforests and jungles. Here, local culture is the design reference and guests can be assured an authentically indigenous spa experience, which is in most cases what they travelled so far to enjoy.

LIGHTING

There are many ingenious ways of immersing guests in the spa universe, with lighting playing an increasingly prominent role in achieving desired effects. Urquiola's



shrewd play with light revolves around the hypothesis that different types of lights and colours affect mood and behaviour in diverse ways. Green, for example, is thought to calm the mind and reduce stress, while red energises, encourages creativity and enhances the sense of smell and neutral off-white promotes positive feelings throughout the body. Urquiola's use of green malachite and black ceramic lends a calm energy to the swimming pool and common areas of the spa without being dark and obscure.

Thanks to radical new technologies, designers can now work with light as a real material. "Lights not only set the mood of the spa, but also create positive changes in the mind and body," says Adria Lake of A.W.Lake Spa Concepts in Singapore. "We can do so much with LED lighting. It's sustainable, flexible and waterproof – its usage is amazing. It can even look fluid. This flexibility allows designers full control over how you perceive space, accentuate the depth of a volume or make it disappear," she adds. In one of Lake's current projects in Chengdu, China, the overall effect achieved through her use of light is a treatment room with no walls, floor or ceiling. "We are doing away with solid walls that seem to enclose. It's like riding a light beam," the designer says. "Using translucent materials with lighting gives the sensation of movement. [Albert] Einstein was the inspiration here," she adds wryly.

While dimming lights does help induce that vital relaxation state, Lake is concerned that this can be taken to extremes, leaving inadequate light in the spa (especially in the therapy rooms) for essential post-treatment cleaning. "Lighting must be adjustable at both ends of the spectrum to satisfy client needs during treatments and cleaning needs in between. And when light is virtually absent, it also plays a role by highlighting other senses such as touch. Walking on stones, cork, sand or an unfinished versus smooth slate floor, contributes to the experience interior designers imagine for us, while being able to adjust floor temperature with warm and cold spots helps engage the senses in very unexpected ways."



THIS PAGE: Indoor pool at Spa Mandarin Oriental, Barcelona. OPPOSITE PAGE: Staircase at ESPA Riga. OPENING PAGE: The pool at Atomic Spa Suisse Boscolo Hotel

FUNCTIONALITY

Many of the world's best known architects (think Starck and Garcia for instance) have been asked to design spas. While creative masterminds like these would undoubtedly design the most stunning looking spas, in many cases, they would not be functional as not enough thought or space would have been dedicated to the actual practicalities of running the spa. "If spas are not functionally efficient they won't last as a business," adds Lake. "Performance is the most important criteria for success. Will it deliver the type of experience the guest deserves?" she asks.

Other potential pitfalls that Lake has witnessed include insufficient back-of-house facilities needed to support front-of-house treatments (for example, product/linen storage, product preparation pantry and therapist waiting area), and poorly planned treatment rooms designed without service flow and overall guest experience in mind. "As a result, therapists are not able to work efficiently and the guest experience is compromised." Unsuitable material selection for floors, walls, or furniture is

a far too common design error. While beautifully handcrafted Balinese silk may look absolutely stunning, if it is not durable, it's a complete waste of money. "When selecting materials for a spa, great thought must be given to usage, maintenance, colour, texture and feel of the materials, as many will come in direct contact with the guests and contribute to their overall experience," she advises.

HIGH-TECH FACILITIES

Bearing in mind that water is the original source of SPA (Salus Per Aquum), it's hardly surprising that it continues to feature prominently in therapy menus across the globe, and in increasingly novel ways. From an architectural and design perspective many of these breathtakingly beautiful thermal and water amenities rate amongst the most technically complex parts of the spa, and indeed in resort spas, the entire hotel. Again, Lake expresses concern that for the amount of investment wet areas and thermal cabins require, few spa designers actually work with wet area specialists in

their design and installation. "As a result, many wet areas/thermal cabins are often not functioning properly or sit empty or unused," she adds.

Some do get it right however, with ESPA Riga being one. Recognised by Conde Nast Traveler (UK) in their 2010 Hot List of the world's best spas, entering the ultra modern ESPA Riga is like stepping into the city's ambitious future. Situated at the heart of one of the Baltic's key trading ports, Riga has absorbed many influences, visible in the medieval, neoclassical and, most famously, art nouveau buildings that line the cobbled streets. ESPA Riga lies at the heart of this exquisite fusion of culture and pays homage to its surroundings with an impressive fin de siècle exterior, originally created by well-known Latvia Architect, Konstantins Peksens. The oversized spa is spread over six floors, with an ultra modern spiral staircase tiled in black Cristallino with a gold mosaic border and a sweeping glass balustrade embracing a crystal focal sculptural element 'Morgen Tau' (created by Eva Menz), that drops six stories like a cascade of ice.

THIS PAGE: Sauna room at ESPA at The Corinthia.
OPPOSITE PAGE: Baths at Green T House

The spa's water and heat facilities are on par with the heightened expectations of this part of the world, with a stunning swimming pool complete with sleek granite pool bar, finished in black mosaic tiles with accented shimmering gold curves. And there is more - a sanarium and rock sauna, aroma steam room, ice fountain, caldarium, laconicum, tepidarium, heated loungers, vitality pool, snow cabins, outdoor hot pool and individual sauna pods (these are particularly amazing during snowy periods when temperatures can drop to -20C).

'Riga had to be right,' said Sue Harmsworth of ESPA. "Our biggest client here is the Russian market and they truly understand spas." Harmsworth sees a big change in the ways spas are perceived today, arguing that while they will always remain a place for chilling and pampering, socialising is very much on the rise. "Larger companies aren't spending in the way they once did. Instead they are encouraging staff to frequent spas as part of their benefits and often host client events in bigger spas. Hence, in our design brief, we allowed space for people to spend time together. Our spa café in Riga is generously sized and has become a focal point for people to meet after treatments. People in the Baltics traditionally drink beer after a sauna so

we have a bar there. In other countries afternoon tea is becoming popular."

The company's latest project is generous in size and also includes hydro facilities. Just a stone's throw from Nelsons Column and the River Thames, the Corinthia Hotel in London's Whitehall, opened just a few months ago in a building that was formerly the headquarters of the city's Ministry of Defense. Designed to showcase ESPA's latest generation of spa - ESPA Life - the spa offers a fully integrated wellness experience focusing on detox, sleep, weight loss, pregnancy and general vitality, alongside the luxury spa experience that has come to be expected from the brand.

The spa is a glamorous system of circular pods with treatment rooms overflowing into corridors, with every detail painstakingly conceived to raise the flag on excellence. Strong curved walls with rich black and champagne lacquer panels enhance the energy flow throughout. Innovative sleepzone pods create cocooning spaces of peace and comfort with the warmth from the ambient fireplaces gently enticing sound sleep (which numerous medical studies are showing is the panacea for much of today's ill health.)

As with Riga, the spas hydro and heat facilities are revolutionary, with calpatta and black marble tiled hammam-style steam rooms, a silver steel swimming pool, amphitheatre-styled German Klafs sauna, black mosaic steam room ice fountain, vitality pools and much, much more. "ESPA Corinthia is pure design," says Harmsworth. "In Europe and other parts of the world, there is a decided move away from the Asian emphasis with glamour coming back big time. We've got to remember that the core business of spa remains massage and relaxation and unless we are prepared to raise the bar by offering something truly special, people will do it at home as they seem to be doing in many parts of Asia, in particular.

ASIAN-CENTRIC DESIGN

As far as design concepts go, the imperial style of Beijing's multi-award winning lifestyle pavilion and bathhouse, Green T. House, certainly holds its own on the

creative global stage. Renowned for cool dining, cutting-edge music performances, art exhibits, tea presentations and ceremonies and indeed its stylish spa, the avant-garde venue attracts an eclectic mix of artists, celebrities and prominent local and international guests.

For many years its creator Zhang Jin (better known as JinR) had a mental picture of the guest accommodation she wanted to complement her Green T. House restaurant and Green T. Living. Her vision came to life when she spotted the black marble bath of a Tang emperor's concubine in Xi'an. Soon after the Bath House Residence was born. "Green T. House is a multi-functional space perfectly suited to modern guests' lifestyles," she says. "A place to enjoy everything you love, from art and culture to cuisine, architecture, gardening, tea, restful sleep

and tea-infused spa therapies. It's a dream of mine and people love it."

The Bathhouse Residence is all about customised experiences and flexible functionality offering early morning green tea infused scrubs, bathing rituals and signature massages, after an indulgent nights sleep in this calming, restful space - a space that subtly morphs into a hip live performance venue come sunset.

With her creative fingers very much on the pulse, JinR continually introduces complementary designer details that are very much in keeping with the 'new China' aesthetic for which her brand is renowned, mixing antiques with modern pieces and blending Chinese style with one-of-a-kind pieces from Italy, the United States and further afield. The common thread in this eclectic mix is tea. "Tea is the main

factor that informs not just our treatments, music and cuisine, but our way of looking at everything we do from treatments to Chinese design aesthetics. It is through this medium that we integrate the senses."

EXTERIOR DESIGN

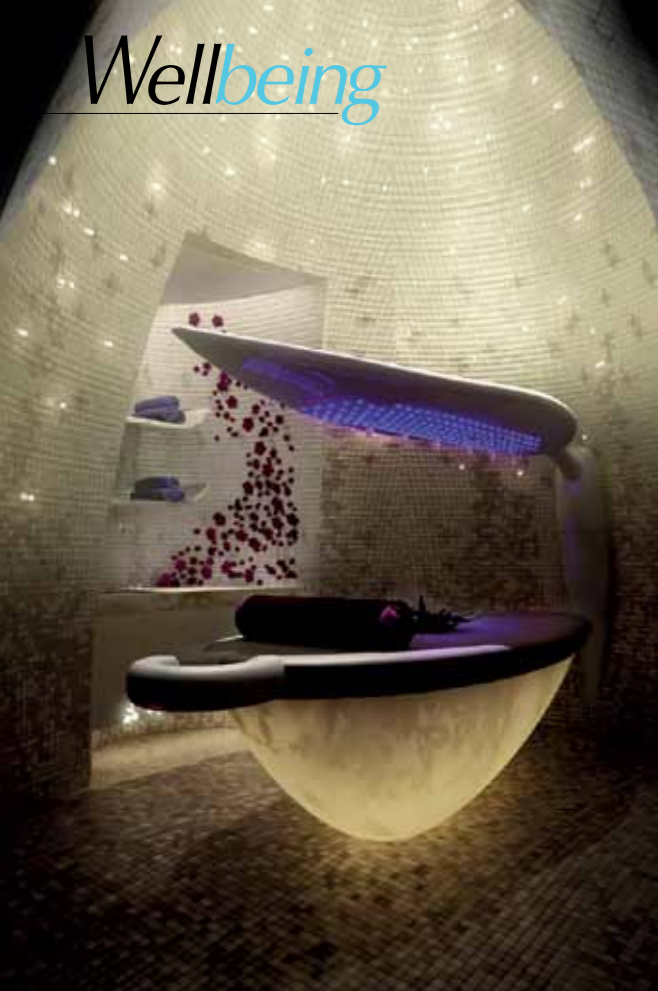
LANDSCAPING

While the quest for the perfectly carved-out spa interior is an important one, the design of the surrounding landscape should not be overlooked. "Urban spas are among my favourites because of the escape potential," says Matthew Zehnder of HZS Design in Shanghai. "When you enter a city spa it

becomes a haven of relaxation and escape from the world that consumes our lives, and I like to immerse the spa setting with plants that evoke warmth and relaxation," he notes. Even in city spas with limited scope, Mother Nature deserves some attention too. Zehnder uses the words 'busy' and 'simple' for his plant theology, setting a complex leaf patterned plant next to, or into a grouping of a simple-leaved, simple-textured plant to create a calming focal point in the spa setting. He argues that when choosing the landscape for a city spa, it is absolutely essential to create the mood, and the appropriate plants, their textures, leaf colours, bark, stems, even their fruiting and blooming, can make the difference between a successful city project and an utter failure.

It is Zehnder's belief that spa design and landscape integration are two separate





sciences and he would never attempt to interrupt the spa designer's creative talent with a poorly planned landscape experience. "When I plan a landscape that contains a spa as its central point, I take into consideration the location, the clients ideals, the textures of the hardscape, the lighting and the plant materials. When these materials are mixed, to me, its as if a cake laden with the most delicious ingredients is setting in the oven. Unless I add the exact mix, it is a failure -- not just to me but also to the client."

"There are no boundaries," argues renowned Bangkok-based landscape architect Bill Bensley. "As a landscape architect I've been taught to protect the earth and environment, and as an architect I want to do the same." And his studio's latest project Coqoon Spa at Phuket's Indigo Pearl resort is no exception. "At Coqoon we were given a piece of land with a series of monumental Banyan trees. If we had to cut down the trees to build the spa, I would have to quit my vocation," he says dryly. "If we built a normal 'bungalow' beneath these trees, it might have worked but the roof of the bungalow would still limit the interaction of the guest with these magnificent trees. If we were to land a nest in the trees like a bird would build, then we would be getting closer to the nature-guest relationship I am seeking.

So that's just what we did."

"The Nest' is a spa suite suspended midair and accessed by a flying bridge, allowing guests to get up close with nature. More sumptuous therapy rooms can be found nestled in the backdrop of rich luscious rainforest and tropical gardens with individual pools, rain showers, steam rooms and sauna.

The Coqoon Spa is an extension and refinement of the industrial chic character of the hotel itself that is very much in keeping with Bensley's criteria for design success. "We must first look deeply into the history of the place being built. The site at Indigo Pearl was originally an old tin mine, owned by the (current) owners' grandfather. Fascinated by this, I visited the owning family's other mines and old homes that were an amazing time capsule of mid century Thai modernism. The tin mines had retained some of the old machinery and tally chalk boards for the day's production, These have all been reused in the new resort."

Saying this he is adamant that resort architecture must always take a second seat to Mother Nature. "We want the guest to remember the environment, not our architecture. I believe that the best spas have an acute sense of exoticism and no place else rivals the diversity of Asia in this respect."

NATURE'S DESIGN

The heart of England's New Forest is undoubtedly every landscape designers dream blank canvas. In these extraordinarily beautiful surroundings Mother Nature holds pride of place at Lime Wood – a luxurious boutique country house hotel with an unmistakable designer difference.

"We've used Lime Wood's classical structure as the basis of our design, kept the spirit of its past and added the odd contemporary twist to bring it to life," says Lime Wood director, David Elton. An integral part of the Lime Wood concept is Herb House, a three-storey destination spa exclusively dedicated to wellbeing that has significantly raised the bar for destination spas in Europe and indeed worldwide. With its dream forest inspiration, the Herb House naturally invites a sense of calm offering clients the ultimate opportunity for rejuvenation.

Herb House features state-of-the-art facilities comparable with the world's best spas including bath houses with private steam rooms, outdoor steaming hot pools, sauna, mud house, caldarium, private soak baths, ozone treated indoor lap pool and comprehensive roof top gym – all perfectly complemented by a all-inclusive holistic and Ayurvedic therapy menu and beautifully

natural products from Bamford, VOYA, NUDE and Tri Dasha.

What sets Lime Wood apart however is its rooftop 'Herbery', a spectacular roof garden filled with a diverse range of herbs and a one-of-a-kind mintarium that truly consolidates the forest experience. "We wanted to bring more 'nature' into the spa itself, revealing that living plants didn't just need to stop in the New Forest," says Elton whose love of landscape led to this very special herbal hideaway.

The roof is divided into diverse areas for reflection, all interspersed with cleverly carved-out seating spaces. A central bay tree-lined walkway underplanted with classic English lavender leads very naturally to the most calming meditation area imaginable, anchored with ancient gnarled olive trees and entirely surrounded by basil, lemon and 15 varieties of mint (from chocolate, banana, pineapple, apple and coconut to spearmint, peppermint and many more).

"Each seating area is themed with different herbal combinations to ensure a diverse experience – from bergamot and cotton lavender to lemon verbena and catmint, purple sage and rosemary, white lavender and variegated sage," Elton explains. Old marble and stone mortars and pestles are dotted throughout for guests to blend their own herbal recipes. "Just the scent of the mint is therapy in itself," he adds, "with the cleansing nature of the herbs helping to further perfect guests' yoga, meditation and reflection."

The fragrant journey continues at ground level with gnarled olives and numerous varieties of thyme guiding the way through the gardens. The walls have been planted with cordon trees that can be used in spa infusions or in the café - cherries, apricots, peaches, apples, pears, vines, figs, mulberries, fragrant honeysuckle, jasmine, roses, and wisterias. In essence, this is Mother Nature's creative genius at its very best.

SENSORY EXPERIENCE

What is so significant about the spas of today is that in addition to looking good, more often than not they are getting it right by penetrating the heart of today's ever more sophisticated consumer. To quote Green T. House's JinR, "What designers can apply to any project is the integrative attention to all of the senses." And this seems to be just what this band of creative talent is achieving and long may this continue. 🌿

THIS PAGE: The 'Bird Island' suite at Les Sources de Caudalie, France. OPPOSITE PAGE: (left to right) Spa room at W Sentosa, Singapore; Coqoon Spa at Indigo Pearl.



DESIGNER DETAILS

In his final project with Maison Martin Margiela, esoteric fashion designer Martin Margiela explored a different artistic avenue - interior design by creating a suite for one of France's most luxurious spa's, Les Sources de Caudalie in the heart of Bordeaux's Graves wine region (www.sources-caudalie.com). The owners wanted unexpected surprises with the designer having complete carte blanche and that, it seems, is just what they got. The "Ile aux Oiseaux" (Bird Island) suite has an unexpectedly avant-garde atmosphere combining elegance and minimalism with the fashion designer's arcane creativity. Decked out with calfskin rugs, cracked mirrors and antique furniture, the suite sits apart from the hotel in an idyllic stilt-mounted cabin, with Margiela's typically white-on-white décor being complemented by a shocking flash of scarlet in the form of a giant pair of lips—a replica of Salvador Dali's classic Mae West Sofa from 1936.