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**COVER STORY:** Up-and-Coming Designers

Starck's Latest Landmark in Paris

Purchasing Do's and Don'ts

Q+A with Grace Leo



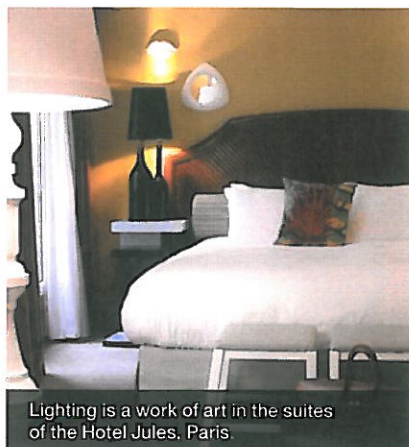




Grace Leo, founder of G.L.A. Hotels



The bar in the Hotel Royal Riviera, Saint Jean Cap Ferrat, shows off its wild side.



Lighting is a work of art in the suites of the Hotel Jules, Paris.

Courtesy of G.L.A. Hotels

## Q+A: Grace Leo

The pioneering founder of G.L.A. Hotels talks about the evolution of her design philosophy and what young designers can do to get noticed and get work.

BY MARY SCOVIAK

**G**race Leo has built a career on knowing when to break the rules. It started in 1981, when the young Hong Kong native parlayed a degree from the Cornell School of Hotel Administration into a position overseeing Warwick Hotels International's expansion from Asia to North America and Europe. In 1986, she launched her Paris-based management, development and marketing company, G.L.A. Hotels (which stood for Grace Leo-Andrieu, a surname she

changed after her divorce), going against advice from all quarters that the move was "crazy." Big-name chains ruled the hotel world then, but she saw a major opportunity for unique, style- and service-led boutique hotels. Clearly, she's been proven right, having built out her portfolio to more than 24 properties worldwide and created marketing alliances with Taj Hotels and Morgans Hotel Group. Here, the first lady of boutique hotels talks about fashion, fads and what makes a hotel fantastic.

**BD: Your father was a businessman in Hong Kong whose investments included The Astor on Kowloon, which means you grew up with hotel operations. When did you start to see the importance of the design side?**

Leo: Even at Cornell, I was always interested in the design, but there was little opportunity at the time to learn more. When I landed a job with Warwick and moved to Paris, the group was buying up tired hotels that needed renovation. I was



confronted with design on a pragmatic level. At the time, the function of interior design was about making the hotel look pretty, not about creating a marketable identity. I really saw what style could do when Ian Schrager opened Morgans Hotel in New York and used the French designer Andrée Putman. That property was modern, sleek, ahead of its time. I was inspired to do the same in Europe.

**BD: How did you define what your boutique hotels would be?**

The notion of boutique should convey a sense of rarity about it. It's an intimate place, friendly with almost a local, neighborhood vibe. When I started out, yes, there was Morgans and a few others, but no real templates. I had to create one in my head. I imagined myself as a foreign visitor coming into a hotel for the very first time. The décor should somehow fulfill my fantasies and expectations and describe how I would be spending a few days in a specific environment. I didn't want standard, predictable interiors that could be anywhere in the world. So for my first hotel, the Montalembert in Paris, I wanted the place to feel like the Left Bank. Guests had to be greeted with a warm, sincere welcome, not a corporate one.

**BD: What are the building blocks of good boutique hotel design now?**

It's important to understand the customer



Lisbon's Bairro Alto Hotel references influences from some of the country's legendary designers and architects.

profile. Do market research beforehand. Draw inspiration from the hotel's locality to establish a sense of time/place/history. Come up with a theme/concept/story board that motivates the design team to focus. Think big, then scale down appropriately.

**BD: Is there a major "don't"?**

Don't deliberately overspend. Institutional investors won't accept it.

**BD: Boutique hotels need impact. So where do you draw the line on what's too much?**

Over-the-top starts when a hotel is over-designed. The ideas for a big hotel shouldn't get squished into a small one. The test is when a guest feels oppressed in the

surroundings, rather than enjoying a sense of relaxation and ownership.

**BD: What design fad should go away?**

The predictable "trendy" look that's a cross between a nightclub and a diner!

**BD: How has your design philosophy changed from the Montalembert and The Clarence (Dublin) to the new projects, like Lisbon's Bairro Alto and others?**

My philosophy hasn't really changed; it has just evolved. Each property has to have a personalized, customized approach. My point of honor is that I never repeat what I've done before. I also ensure that practicality is not sacrificed to aesthetics.

**BD: You have an extraordinary eye for finding design stars before they're celebrities. What do you look for?**

You must be referring to commissioning [the French designer] Christian Liaigre when I did the Hotel Montalembert in Paris. Christian was relatively unknown when I hired him to help me to renovate this property. The younger generation knows from the media what good design is. So, I get a lot of submissions of their work. What impresses me is an overall design sensibility, how receptive the designers are, how well they listen. I want to know they'll interpret my vision and fulfill the design brief without being concerned by their own egos. I like someone who is a bit avant-garde and doesn't necessarily follow the



A grid of blue is the perfect frame for the pristine bedroom in this suite in the newly renovated Vidago Palace near Oporto.





Various styles and eclectic pieces combine to create a singular look for the Hotel Beauchamps, Paris.



Colonial design themes inform the Oliver Messel-designed Great Room bar in Hotel Cotton House, Mustique.

trends but thinks ahead. I tend to identify the "right" designer for the "right" project. If the project is minimalistic, I need someone who would respond to that.

**BD: What are the pros/cons of hiring a young designer in a young firm versus working with a young project designer in a large, established studio?**

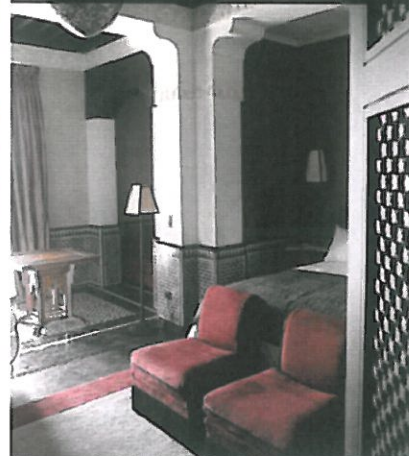
My preference is to work with up-and-coming designers who have their own studio or a small- to medium-sized firm that takes on extra draftsmen on an as-needed basis. The pros of this are that they tend to be very creative, flexible and

produce more original work. I like to work with people with a fresh eye, rather than very established firms that give you the same off-the-shelf designs and just change the name of the hotel at the bottom of the design plans. The cons are that they may not fit the criteria of what financial institutions/investment partners would require for comfort and assurance.

**BD: What do you like to see in a presentation by a designer?**

In terms of pitching work, communication skills are key, as is a nicely assembled album of previous work that shows the designer's

Jacques Garcia and Dominique Chenot are just two of the big names crafting the look for Hotel Selman, Marrakech, slated to open later this year.



range and commercial experience. The basic tools would be a preliminary presentation that's well organized and relevant, the usual design boards or mood boards. In the case of a bigger or more complex-scale project, a model is a great visual aid.

**BD: How can designers work better with clients during the process?**

More junior designers in independent firms have to learn how to map out their work in an institutional way. They will not be selected unless they have an organizational process that assures the client that the drawings could be produced in a timely and cost-effective manner. They have to demonstrate they can be responsive and act quickly to resolve any issues that may come up during the development phase.

**BD: Where should they take more initiative?**

They should do their own research, familiarize themselves with operational needs and anticipate. Don't take the general manager's word as gold. (I'm going to get clobbered for that statement.) On-site management should be consulted regularly during the design and development phase, but bear in mind that the refurbishment of a hotel or a restaurant is intended to change and improve the way things have been in the past. So it's obvious that it will cause a change of old habits and routines. **BD**

For more from Grace Leo, go to [www.boutiquedesign.com](http://www.boutiquedesign.com)