

hospitality design

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hd boutique

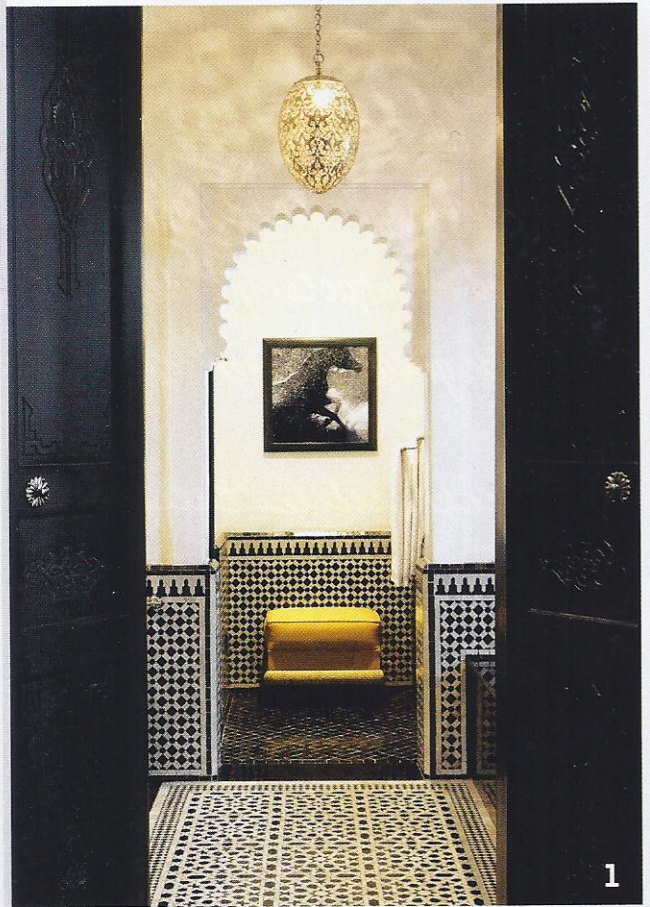
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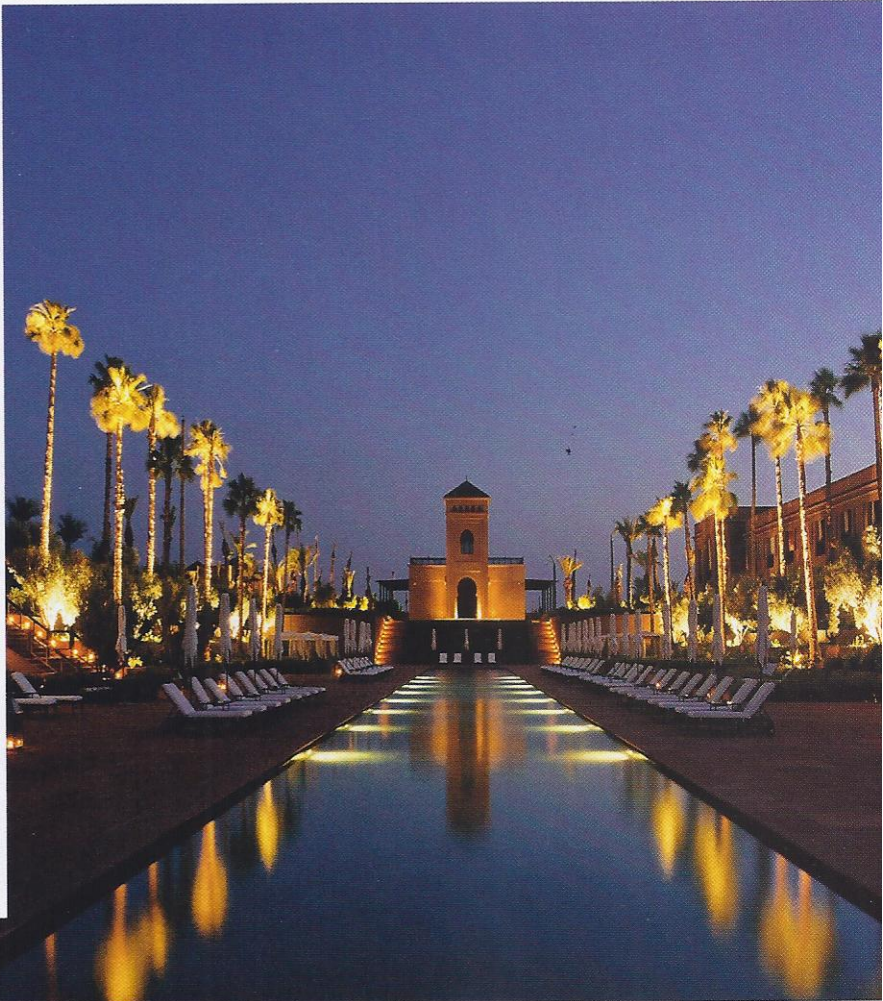
HD Boutique
a hospitality design event

grace leo

By Stacy Shoemaker Raven



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GRACEFUL TOUCH

European hotelier Grace Leo brings her exquisite taste stateside



Since 1985, Hong Kong-born, American-educated, Parisian hotelier Grace Leo has made a name for herself managing, operating, and creating some of the most fashionable boutique hotels. From the Vidago Palace in Portugal to Bel Ami in Paris to the Cotton House in Mustique, each property in the G.L.A. Hotels family is unique (she also does sales and marketing for Taj and Morgans hotels), and they all benefit from her discerning eye. Now, she is taking on a hotel that's a departure from the others: the business-oriented Millennium UN Plaza, her

first hotel redevelopment venture in the U.S. and New York. Here, she discusses the importance of authenticity, the similarities between Jakarta and Caracas, and her role as a producer and editor.

How did the Millennium UN Plaza project come about?

I have known of [Millennium & Copthorne Hotels'] chairman Kwek Leng Beng for years, who's a very formidable businessman and a charismatic and brilliant person, but we never had the opportunity to meet. So we met last November in Singapore and got talking. He expressed to me that he had this project and it was very urgent to get it done. I said, 'Well if you'd like, I can do an assessment for you and then

we'll go from there.' And that's exactly what happened. We were hired as of January, and our deadline is to be ready for the General Assembly of the United Nations in September. As you know, to do a renovation project, which requires total gutting out of a building, is a major piece of work to get done in this timeframe.

What's your scope of the project?

I've developed mostly independent hotels—whether it's the Montalembert [her first and one of the original design hotels in Europe], the Lancaster [also in Paris], or doing the Clarence for Bono and the Edge in Dublin. But this one is part of a group, a chain, if you will. We're brought in as hospitality consultants, which means we

1. Black and white dominate at the Selman Marrakech.

2. The Selman's dramatic pool area.

3. A rendering of the lounge at the Hermitage Hotel in Jakarta.



renovation of the lobby, and then the east tower, which contains the bulk of the rooms.

How is this one different than any other hotels you have worked on?

The other hotels I have done are a little more intimate, architecturally more interesting. But this is quite interesting in its own right. *The New York Times* had written something about the renovation, and the writer's take was that here is an interior that is almost completely as it was in the seventies, so should it be protected? I'm a great fan of mid-century furniture and I collect it, but on the other hand, you can't keep certain interiors because they look too tired. And we would never get the kind of clientele that we want to go after if we don't do something drastic.

Another new hotel in your portfolio with a dramatic interior is the Selman Marrakech.

It's [designed by] Jacques Garcia. We didn't get very involved on the design side because it was more or less decided. I have to say that compared to the Mamounia [another hotel in Marrakech by Garcia], which is of course a landmark and needs to be very garish because that was what it was before, this one is much more toned down. All the mosaic is black, white, and gray marble, beautifully carved and handcrafted—all of the craftsmen that Garcia used are the best in the country. For me it creates an emotion, no matter if you like it or don't like it.

Creating an emotion, is that luxury today?

Authenticity is still very much key, at least it's my philosophy. I really like when I'm creating a space that is relevant to where it is: the city, the culture, the language. And I always try to reflect whatever the art or architecture of the area is—what elements of the history can we bring back to the table? It's funny when I read interviews in magazines and people are saying the same thing as me and then you see their hotels and they look totally corporate, like they could be anywhere.

So in New York, it has to look like it's a New York product, and Selman should look like it's in Marrakech. And now we are doing a hotel in Jakarta, the Hermitage Hotel. It's located in Menteng, an exclusive tree-lined neighborhood which is adjacent to the heart of the city, full of beautiful historical mansions and houses, including the embassy quarter where this hotel is located. It's in one of the historical Dutch buildings, dating back to the thirties, so it has a bit of Art Deco architecture. I try to spin the story around that—we are collecting antiques that bring back the Dutch furniture—but we tried to create that without being overpowering either.

The owners picked interior designer Thomas Elliott of PAI Design who's based in Jakarta and works mostly in residential, but he's very used to building luxury houses for all these very wealthy people. It's not the first time that we worked with designers that have never done hotels. It is a risk, but it's one that we're willing to take if we

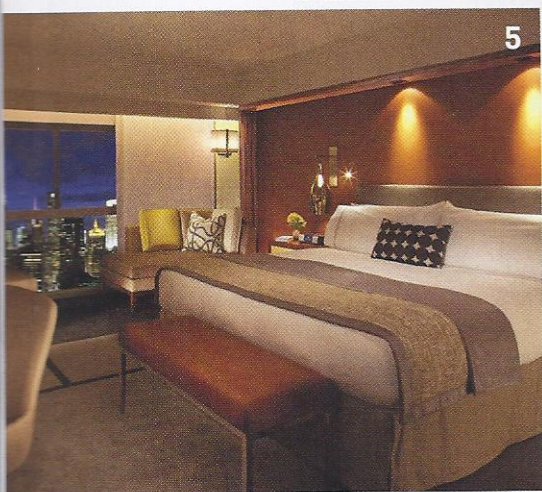
don't step on the foot of the operator. But I'm bringing in a certain expertise, not only in the repositioning of the entire product, but also my renovation skills. It's a growing facet of my work since hotel companies are seeking a more holistic approach to re-inventing existing properties.

The question here is, how do we transform a hotel which has been perceived more like a 4-Star, tired hotel, which has not had any kind of refurbishment in the last fifteen, sixteen years, and reposition it into a 5-Star hotel? Particularly, we're dealing with the west tower with 153 keys. My vision as well as the chairman's is to reopen as a luxury hotel within a hotel—it will be rebranded the ONE UN New York. We have a separate entrance, but shared public areas. So we are handling marketing, projecting a different image, and then, on the physical side, it's literally guiding them through the whole exercise of the renovation and helping them project manage. Next will be the restaurant, a more extensive

perspectives **interview** grace leo

4. A rendering of the luxurious private dining room at the Hermitage.

5. The Didier Gomez-designed model room for the west tower of the Millennium UN Plaza, soon to be branded the UN ONE New York.



find that the designer actually listens to you and work with you through the whole thing. Look at Christian Liaigre. I started his career in this business with the Montalembert.

You are also working on the hotel Cayena in Caracas, Venezuela.

The hotel has been built on a site in the prestigious tree-lined area called the Castellana, adjacent to the business center of Caracas. It is full of low-rise buildings, formerly grand homes to wealthy families, and most of them

“I see myself as a movie producer—but I produce hotels. I orchestrate everybody’s efforts to make the vision a reality.”

have been converted to commercial use now. It is quite similar in setting and environment to the Hermitage—and both countries are oil-rich. Jakarta is on the verge of becoming a major metropolitan city, while Caracas has all the signs of a city highly controlled by government with a suppressed demonstration of individuality and wealth. Each will also undoubtedly be the first luxury boutique hotel protected from the hustle and bustle of the cities. For Cayena, I really had to search hard for that authenticity I was talking about before. So I went with the combination of some Spanish, some European, some Indian influences.

It seems you are still very hands-on, overseeing the process.

Yes, I’m passionate about what I do. I am a hotelier by training; I graduated from Cornell, but from experience I see myself as a movie

producer—but I produce hotels. I orchestrate everybody’s efforts to make the vision a reality.

Right now the market is still soft. There’s not a whole lot of new construction, but there’s a lot of recycling going on. I don’t say that I’m recycling, which is not very glamorous, but I’m reinventing hotels, repackaging and repositioning them, so they have a new lease on life. I’m not the designer, but I edit things. I think of Anna Wintour and *The September Issue*. She’s so brilliant because she edits exactly what goes into that magazine. And that’s what makes the difference—you chop out all the [unneeded] stuff and get into the essence of what needs to be in that magazine, or in the hotel. It’s not always the obvious choices. I think the problem with a lot of these boutique hotels is that they make it so predictable. I think one has to be a bit audacious. **hd**