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FAVOURITE ROOM

A home away from home

In designing the luxurious new St. Regis Hotel in Toronto, DesignAgency took cues from residential spaces

While many look to the St. Regis Hotel as a standard bearer for exclusivity and extravagance – more than a century ago, its founder, John Jacob Astor IV, and his mother hosted invite-only parties and next-level midnight suppers for the ultra-influential and intriguing of New York's high-society set – Allen Chan of DesignAgency, tasked with designing the interiors for Toronto's own St. Regis outpost that opened late last year, was looking closer to home for more contemporary notions of luxury.

"It's a changing definition," says Chan, who along with partners Matt Davis and Amrar Nakhaneh founded the design firm 20 years ago. Whereas luxury used to imply grandeur, and there's plenty of that at St. Regis Toronto to be sure (although the onyx wall finishes can be attributed to the building's former tenant, Trump International Hotel and Tower), Chan contends that truly opulent spaces exude intimacy, similar to home, where one enjoys whiling the hours away. "People say luxury is time. You can't buy that back."

In designing Louis Louis, the restaurant on the pad floor, the trio behind DesignAgency were inspired by their client, who suggested the space should feel like the inside of a whisky glass. "We approached it in a kind of literal way," says Chan. From the custom 16-by-25-foot ceiling mural by artist Madison Van Rijn, who visually interpreted swirling spirits, to the custom golden-hued fluted chandeliers to the palette of walnut, bronze and bevelled glass finishes and champagne-coloured seating and draperies, the "overall feel is like that," Chan says, "but when you break it down to the smaller seating clusters, there's much more colour and texture like you'd find in your own home."

"To make it more palatable and create smaller micro vignettes within this larger space, you have to make things more varied," he says. That means the restaurant's furnishings are eclectic and lighting sources are found up, down and all around. "Having all the lighting come from above is never a good thing," Chan says. "In my home, I have lighting from all different sources: up-lighting, floor lighting, lamp lighting, ceiling lighting. So, lighting to create an overall effect is very important – and was a cornerstone of this project."

The design of the hotel was an exercise in conceptual maximalism for DesignAgency. Chan and company were inspired by the history of the hotel brand, Southern Ontario's unique geography "shaped by wind and water," the city's industrial past and major players such as Gooderham and Worts, once the largest distiller in Canada, and Toronto's built landscape and position as an outpost for trading and a "place of meeting," Chan says. "You throw all that stuff into the blender and some of those ideas become stronger in terms of the overall narrative and design and some fall off. But over all, the concept is to create this really eclectic place of gathering," he says, which bonfires back to the history of the St. Regis as a space for dialogue and exchange.

Chan, Davis and Nakhaneh will be speaking about their process and projects at the Interior Design Show in Toronto this month and giving tours of the St. Regis for those curious, who might not otherwise get to see the interior of the venue or procure an invite to a midnight supper. "People are always asking what they can do, what cues they can take from hospitality design to bring into their home," Chan says. "But a lot of what we're doing is taking cues from residential design, in terms of trying to create more intimate settings for conversation, bringing that sense of eclectisism and place making."

– KRISTINA GUSMANOVIC

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28.3 Random by Omer Arbel for Bocci, $2,550 at Kiosk (kioskdesign.ca).

Capsule wall sconce by Chris Turner, $2,730 at Avenue Road (avenueroad.com).

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