



The Betsy Hotel South Beach, Miami

# colonial comfort

By Tony Smyth

*The Betsy Hotel on Miami's South Beach exudes an understated colonial plantation elegance. But this Georgian-styled jewel holds a wonderfully dark secret.*

**WITH A NAME** that harks back to the founding of the United States and its eponymous connection to that most iconic of emblems, the Stars and Stripes, the Betsy Hotel South Beach takes its colonial style queues from the British school – despite the fact that the hotel's namesake, Betsy Ross, is emblazoned on the façade.

Miami's South Beach is one of the most famous architectural districts in the world, and The Betsy hotel distinguishes itself from the curvy geometric patterns and clean lines of its Art Deco neighbours by relying on classic formations. With its expansive four-column portico and signature shuttered windows, The Betsy evokes traditional colonial architecture. But it was designed and created by the man responsible for the majority of the most famous hotels in the area built in the Art Deco style – L. Murray Dixon.

The 160th Anniversary of the USA's Declaration of Independence in 1928 ushered in a period of nostalgia for the early years of the nation. John D Rockefeller's restoration of Colonial Williamsburg was a prime case in point. Completed in the 1930s, it served as a catalyst for other historic preservation efforts around the country. The past was renovated and gussied up, perhaps to magnify it as a way of renewing the faith of Americans struggling to emerge from the Great Depression. Everything from restaurants to furniture was re-created in a colonial image and Hollywood provided its powerful endorsement of the colonial style by featuring it as the signature architectural style of suburban homes in such popular films as *Bringing Up Baby*.

Also, at that time, the Work Projects Administration (WPA) created a printed guide to the 'colonial east,' which included images and photographs emphasising architecture from the 17th through the 19th centuries. Complementing the series were numerous magazine articles that included plans from architects and building companies and an explosion of popular and professional books honouring colonial architecture. When Dixon got around to considering how best to embrace the colonial chic of the moment, perhaps



Opposite page, top to bottom:  
The Lobby and Lobby Bar;  
BLT Steak by Chef Laurent Tourondel.  
This page:  
B Bar lounge and nightclub.

he couldn't resist the urge to go further. Opened in South Beach in 1942, The Betsy Hotel Roes stood out all the more for its stark yet graceful contrast to Dixon's Art Deco oeuvre.

Today, The Betsy Hotel's exterior stands as the lone surviving example of Florida Georgian architecture on Ocean Drive. Contrary to typical colonial design, the interior design is bright, open and connected, and Dixon took liberties with proportions while interpreting the colonial form. In that slight re-conceiving of textbook colonial, Dixon created not an opposite that didn't fit, but rather a counterpoint that did then, and that still does.

The modern-day take on the interiors by interior designers Diamante Pedersoli and Carmelina Santoro fully embraces Dixon's spatial aesthetic as well as architecturally allowing them to create a path to be updated.

Commenting on the inspiration for the refurbishment of the entrance and lobby area, Pedersoli says: "The building itself gave us a lot of inspiration. The transparency it has is because of the immense windows and the light that comes in during the day whereby the beach and palms seem to come inside the lobby space and then at night it is the lobby that flows out into the street."

The choice of furniture, materials and artwork define the public spaces and the lobby, and in some respects really tie the overall concept together. The use of Plantation Style wood shutters, which are present in the public area, such as the lobby and the restaurant, can also be seen adding gravitas to the private areas and the guest bedrooms.

The artwork that is presented on the lobby walls and along the corridors to the guestrooms has been selected by the hotel's owners and form a revolving gallery.

"We used materials that have a connection with the design concept, for their origin, their colour, finishes, historical use and so on," says Pedersoli. "We also tried to be sensitive to the sustainability of the object we were creating."

The design duo did encounter some resistance to some of their original design ideas, mostly due to the strict rules and limitations working with a building



that has been listed as a landmark. However this did not deter them, and using the cues from the architecture they took further inspiration from the natural elements where the hotel is located – sand from the beach, coral from the sea, green from the palm trees and purple (lilac) from the bougainvilleas and came up with four different colour schemes for the guest rooms.

"Lighting is always a very important aspect of design," says Santoro. "For the Betsy we considered not only the light we added using unique fixtures but also the natural lighting from outside, which because of the exposure of the hotel on the beach is a fundamental part of the perception of the whole space. So we dedicated part of the design to creating a way to let light in and to let light out at night."

Three Fortuny Chandeliers cast a welcoming illumination over the lobby in the evenings.

Guestrooms have been styled to evoke a casual elegance with an island tropical feel. Wooden ceiling fans gently waft the sea breezes throughout the bright interiors accented by antique furniture pieces and the natural colouring of the surrounding area.

The listed status of the building meant that careful attention had to be given to programme and plan the spaces. The design team found that for some rooms the building regulations limited the

space available but in others they were able to expand and divided the rooms into categories of sizes: standard, medium and suites.

The owners have outsourced their food and beverage operations and the BLT Steak (Bietro Laurent Tourondel) situated in the lobby adds a homely ambience as guests arrive at the reception.

Tourondel's company also operate the relaxed and casual lobby bar which is studded with palms, ceiling fans and plantation style chairs. The rooftop deck also has a bar and looks across Ocean Drive to the beach and the sea beyond.

"We love the sails we used to shade the lounge areas and the open cabanas on the roof top," enthuses Santoro. "It's a special feature, creating a technological but traditional element and at the same time a grand feeling of the sea's proximity, the wind blowing and the power of the Floridian sun."

But what is perhaps the most stark contrast to the homely feel of The Betsy is the B Bar which occupies a semi-basement that until recently was a low-ceiling store room. This dark hued, softly lit bar exudes urban sophistication and elegance. Reminiscent of a New York speakeasy the space is described as a 'jewel box'.

Designed by international hospitality designer Callin Fortis, principal of Bigtime Design Studios, guests enter the bar via a dimly lit passage that still suggests its service past. Fortis has included optical illusion as part of the magic that transforms this otherwise claustrophobic space. By using a reflective vinyl that acts as a mirror he ostensibly enlarges the visual feeling of space exponentially. The shocker comes when the DJ starts playing and the ceiling starts to vibrate. All part of the fun. †



This page, top to bottom:  
Betsy Grand Suite living room;  
Classic room.  
This page, middle spread:  
Betsy Grand Suite bedroom.

Photography courtesy of The Betsy Hotel South Beach

This page, right, top to bottom:  
Betsy Master Suite;  
the rooftop deck.



## global dimensions

*In a closed-room, with bright natural Floridian light and the gentle lull of the sea – or perhaps it was the whirr of the air-conditioning unit – six designers, HA+D, our sister publication Hotel Design and sponsors sat down to a breakfast round table which was actually a rectangle.*

*The discussion was just as geometrically challenged and took one-and-a-half hours instead of the single hour we had allocated and could have gone on much longer.*

*Here is just a snapshot of where our debate went and what we tried to identify as being global design: whether that was a perception of aesthetic or doing business in the international arena, we had several opinions to work from.*

*Venue: The Betsy Hotel, South Beach, Miami, Florida.*

**Moderator:**  
Tony Smyth  
Executive Editor/Publisher  
Hospitality Architecture+Design/HA+D

**Panelists:**  
Andrew Chiu  
Principal/Regional Director Asia Pacific  
DiLeonardo International

Nunzio DeSantis, FAIA, LEED AP  
Executive Principal  
HKS Hospitality/Hill Glazier Studio

Karrie Drinkhahn, IIDA, LEED AP  
Vice President/Principal  
Getty

Jonathan F. Douglas, AIA  
Managing Principal  
VOA

Callin Fortis  
Principal  
Big Time Design Studios

Barrie Livingstone, ASID  
Principal  
Barrie Livingstone Design

**Sponsors:**  
Aqua Hospitality  
Front of the House/Room 360 Degree by FOH

Photographer: Moris Moreno

**TS:** How would you define global design, in as much as how it affects your business and how you look at what it is, what you used to do, and also if and how it's changing from when you just worked domestically?

**NS:** I'd like to comment on what this recession means for a lot of full-bodied, full-service hospitality, leisure, lifestyle, architectural firms. From an interior standpoint, I still think there's some serious domestic work in the US, but this recession has forced us as an industry to look beyond our typical boundaries. I think that's extraordinarily important to transition what's going to happen to our design. Because when I think about what the experiences have been these last two, two and a half years, it's all about diversity. I don't necessarily mean diversity in the sense that we typically say it, but when you think about culture, approach, attitude, people, distance—the diversity of what we've learned through this global challenge is extraordinary.

We've had to transform and reach, the thirst and the quest to inspire is different: You handle it differently as we do this global endeavor. I find it incredibly invigorating, because you used to go to the table knowing who you were and who your competitors were. Now you go to the table like a young child, and it's really quite remarkable. It's very refreshing, it's exciting, and it's challenging. But I think that we all have a commonality, and I think that is that we want to deliver an experience that is memorable and lasting. I see the upper crust of the clientele going out to market beyond their own boundaries, going to seek those talents in different locations. And that's what's made us very viable in pursuing this work elsewhere.

So it's a very different play, when what used to be an edge for a firm located in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Jordan or somewhere, is not so much a benefit these days. Because these clients are really interested to reach out because they can see that the value of our service has come down – not what we give in terms of value – but our competitiveness out there. There's so many things that we don't control that yet is defining us as a design firm. I'm playing around the clock.



**AC:** Well, these days, in the region I'm most active in, which is Asia, the Chinese clients are really shaping how we do business simply just because there's so many of them compared to the rest of the world and there's so many more active projects. Not only do we have to be the best [at our head office in the US] but we also have to have a local team that can suit their needs on a real-time basis. They don't want to deal with the time difference and coordination efforts. So our business model really had to make adjustments even though we did have a Hong Kong presence already. But we still had to start making adjustments as far as what the staff does over there, the way we communicate with each other. Technology has definitely helped with that part of it. And in terms of just doing global work, there is I think, a global movement where hospitality design is going. I also think that in different regions it's at different stages of that movement at the same time. You've got to be on the ground and spend a lot of time working with the people. Everybody's different.

**KD:** Yes you must be on the ground but you also must be on your toes. We're working with our Hong Kong office quite a bit, too. The design expectations are the same but just when you think you know what the design process is the timeframe in Asia become so much shorter and the expectations on deliverables are so great so the timing is everything—you're always constantly learning.

**TS:** Looking at a design aesthetic, if there were a definitive American style versus a global style, is there a paradigm shift that is taking place now, to look outside our local influences and be influenced from outside and bring these back home, too?

**KD:** I think if there was, it's starting to merge. Ten years ago you worked on a project here in the United States, you knew how long your thematic design was, you knew how long your design development was. Now we work on projects that move very quickly. We work on projects through our Hong Kong office where the entire documentation is done in I think four or five weeks. So that process has definitely been changing. As far as styles, I think to everybody's point so far, it's kind of expanding your knowledge base and your understanding and your diversity and what the sort of local clientele might be looking for; what different aesthetics might be appropriate or not appropriate. It's not just one specific style. So I think that process for me is just about becoming more global and understanding and exciting because you're able to do so much more.

**TS:** Callin, you talk about need versus want. Is there an education process that we can bring here to a global arena?

**CF:** I'm fortunate enough to do extremely high-end, personality-design driven concepts. I did an international rebranding of the biggest nightlife chain in the UK, called Gatsby's. They really wanted to have that American sort of sensibility and design, entertainment and specifically nightlife, so they went on a six-month search to find the perfect move for their 15-year-old brand. Despite their [UK] economy lagging a little behind I watched them spend £8 million as if it were the US in 2000. What I really took note of is that the sensibility between the client there and here [USA], and the demographic was exactly the same. People wanted to be entertained; they wanted to be in an inspiring environment; they wanted great music; and, they wanted a place to be with their friends. What they didn't need was a \$3,000 table or lots and lots and lots of the latest technology. The

Opposite page, clockwise from top:  
The Panelists, Lobby, The Betsy Hotel,  
South Beach, Miami.

This page, left, top to bottom:  
Karrie Drinkhahn; Nunzio DeSantis;  
Jonathan Douglas.

This page, below, top to bottom:  
Andrew Chiu; Callin Fortis;  
Barrie Livingstone.





clientele were really starting to shift back to more of what I call an analogue world where things were sort of warmer and richer and a little more familiar. At one point we saw everybody wanting the best of everything and it was a challenge. So while you may want all that stuff, what you really need as the end user, are the exact same things that you needed ten years ago.

So the challenge for us was really to come up with this metaphor of a digital world and an analogue world. I'm finding myself shifting away from all the latest technology because any designer can factor in a \$160,000 stealth screen if the budgets are there; that's not that much of a challenge. But what is a challenge is to create the emotional resonance you may get from a stealth screen but do it in a familiar—analogue—affordable way without sacrificing the patron's experience. Because what we do is experiential. People are there for a minute. I don't do residential so the people that I affect don't see my work 365 days a year. This is my quick take on need versus want. I do that now with every project. I go in looking at what I think the demographic really needs, as opposed to what they may want.

**TS:** So it's not just back to basics, but back to some fundamental sort of look at how design builds emotion.

**JL:** A lot of times designers are coming from locations with certain biases in place; whether it's a way of doing business or the way that they want to document a project. And what we picked to clarify our projects is really about understanding culture at work and understanding what some of those biases might be. Our work is almost all involved from a sustainable tourism concept, which is that you don't want to take anything more away than what you bring, so there's sort of a net zero effect both from the cultural and physical perspective. That means that you have to do a lot of homework to figure out that, for example, in Dubai you may have cultural bias about orientation of the building or amenities that we may not even pick up on until way after the design work has been completed. Obviously it's the same thing with China or somewhere else, so understanding those things becomes part of that breakdown of the local experience. People expect it.

The other part of what we're doing is looking at how cultural bias plays into design. People have expectations. They come to South Beach for instance, where everybody wants to be something. Or you go to



China—everybody has expectations of being something else. Those cultural biases may motivate good behaviour or inappropriate behavior depending upon the type of venue. It's a little bit of an academic discussion about what is the right experience to create: Is it where everybody's going wild at a beach bar? That's a great experience, but is it the best experience for people to have?

**BL:** That cultural context is number one. I read an article where somebody said that today's international traveler, when they wake up, wants to know where in the world they are. It struck a chord, because right after that, I had gone on a trip to see a client in Panama, and I had to check out of one of the big brand hotels there, which was like a very bad two-star hotel style hotel, and I had a terrible experience, and I checked right into the only thing that was available, which was a brand new Marriott Courtyard. They did it so right. I walked into that room, and I was immediately in Panama, in Central America. It was just with the colour between the throw, the artwork, the accessories, and it could have been anywhere in the world, but those accessories, and that artwork and the photographs, you immediately knew where you were. It was not only the black and white pictures of the Panama Canal, there was something green and alive going on in the hotel that made you were aware of that theme.

**TS:** How do we look at an increasingly sophisticated emerging market client and manage their expectation and impression of what constitutes international design?

**NS:** Our greatest challenge, and I've heard the word around the table is: expectation. That's one of our biggest challenges abroad. We as designers know we can deliver. We've got a lot of people behind us to make it happen. We need to understand those expectations, because from every boundary, from every location I go to, whether it's for a Sheikh or a CEO, they all expect a process differently and expect you to deliver in a certain way and inspire them in a different way. Pulling that from them takes a tremendous amount of effort. You can't handle each client in the same manner. You may not have access to the Sheikh all that much, so you get one little spurt of information and then you're dealing with five or six little guys under him that honestly have no idea. You may be doing a really personal super-luxury private resort for him to showcase to the most significant people he flies in from all around the world. This is his own little capsule of perception. To get that understanding of what his expectations are, through all these other people, it's really, really difficult.

So as we move through this global realm of design, we've got to remember, first and foremost that we're people serving people. We get that right, the result of our work—the result of our delight—largely does its work for us. †

*This page, left to right:*  
The round table;  
the panelists joined by Jeff Lehman the  
GM of The Betsy; HA+D and Hotel Design  
editor and publisher;  
sponsor representatives from  
Aqua Hospitality and Front of the House;  
panelists' associates.