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Qatar



QR: 20
AED: 20
OMR: 2
BHD: 2
SAR: 20
CHF: 6
JPY: 500
USD: 5.5
Euro: 4

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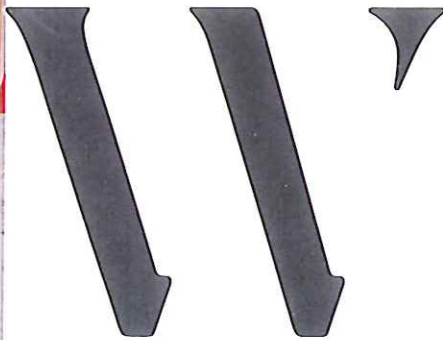
WHAT DO YOU WANT, BRICK?

DIEGO GRONDA EXPLORES MATERIALS IN THE DESIGN PROCESS AT GORDON RAMSAY, ST REGIS DOHA. IN CONVERSATION WITH **SINDHU NAIR.**



TO EXPRESS IS TO DRIVE.
AND WHEN YOU WANT TO GIVE SOMETHING PRESENCE,
YOU HAVE TO CONSULT NATURE.
AND THERE IS WHERE DESIGN COMES IN.

—LOUIS KAHN



When Louis Kahn asked this loaded question, what he anticipated was to celebrate the material and honor it in the pure sense. An ideology that is no longer popular in the current design scenario. And not a question that Diego Gronda, Managing and Creative Director of Rockwell Group, considered as he went about designing the two Gordon Ramsay restaurants at St Regis Doha.

Diego, who is also a big fan of the purist architect Kahn, recreated an abstract English landscape, a winter garden of sorts, in the interiors of a branded restaurant, housed in an Arabian-themed grandiose hotel premises. Sounds surreal? Well, there is reasoning behind this too.

“The idea was to create a series of structures familiar to the British landscape in a very abstract way. We didn’t want to pursue a literal translation of that, as it did sound absurd to have a winter garden in Doha,” agrees Diego.

But the idea seems to have worked well, as the interiors of Opal (one of the Gordon Ramsay restaurants) entice you to take a complete journey of smells, sights and of course culinary expertise.

While there is no material being honored here, the space explains how designers hold the power to mold our senses and take us through a fantasy land of smells and sights and of perceptions, through the cold wet English countryside at Opal, in the pursuit of gratification, in simmering hot Doha! Not the great Kahn’s design principle for sure, but one that surely stands out and works well in this space.

“We were confronted with a complex problem as Gordon Ramsay requested two restaurants instead of one. And we had to create a series of rooms, a journey to really create two different

kinds of dining.”

The challenge of having two completely different dining experiences is indeed massive, with two kinds of crowd visiting the two restaurants.

The solution was a common space, the breathtaking conservatory that serves as an open reception for both these dining spaces or just as a walk-through.

“The grand conservatory makes way to the main dining area called Opal for a casual experience and around its perimeter to the fine dining at one side.”

Diego and team at Rockwell are famous for their “wow” spaces, his earlier designs at the Taj Mahal Palace & Tower Hotel project had a similar focal point in the Wasabi restaurant, at the exquisite private dining room with a sculptural round table lit by an overscale custom fixture of hammered metal.

The stunning space here at Opal is the conservatory, a white and black creation, stark, not too much design ornamentation and yet striking in a way that makes you want to know more. When you think conservatory you would imagine plants, but Diego and team didn’t opt to take the literal meaning of the word while translating it into design, and used a complex material to make the subtle impact.

Diego has instead used pictures by renowned British photographer (of course) Rodney Smith of gentlemen standing on ladders, looking over hedges, or cutting hedges. The pictures are velvet printed on a metal mesh, the material (metal mesh) completely camouflaged by the velvet print of the gentlemen. These meshes are then placed on the perimeter of the conservatory. Kahn would have loved this, the play of materials, for it is certainly intriguing and entirely an offshoot from nature, but in a form of art that is subtle to the core. But then would he, as they are not what they seem?

“Some people understand it but some don’t.

Design Principles
Design is all about subtle features that makes one want to come back for more.



The English Garden: The common room that takes the look of a British winter garden with a wire mesh spanning the periphery of the room; the conservatory are all formal and very British in design.

We love it that way. It is not just for the mystery. It is fairly easy to create a 'wow' factor in restaurants but it is dangerous too. The guests arrive for the first time and love it but then the euphoria of the moment fades away after the first visit. The second time, there is never that wow factor, and then comes disappointment. We try to figure it from the guest's point of view. We want to create layers in the design, so the discovery

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It's not about a design award but it is about how we touch the masses through our work.

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keeps happening. A 'sense of getting to know' and 'falling in love' with the project slowly, along with a timeless classic look with a sense of place, is what we wanted to achieve here," he says.

Aesthetically there was just a subtle discussion with Gordon Ramsay and the Alfardan clan but the design was mostly left to the discretion of the Rockwell Group, given their vast expertise in the hospitality sector.

"Omar Alfardan just wanted the best from us. They did not want the restaurant to have an Arab feel," says Diego.

A decision that was very wise, feels Diego, as they were within a hotel with a strong Arab influence and Alfardan wanted entirely different experiences in all the restaurants within St Regis.

The constraint was the designed space available. But it is interesting how Diego worked around this problem.

"It was a very long space with an extended kitchen that runs along the passage to Opal. So we designed the passage with an analysis that all human beings are lazy by nature and when confronted with a long corridor are too lazy to go to the very end of it. So we needed to create a series of 'innuendo' experiences. We created this through food, through the color of seafood, or the smell of the pizza, instead of using elements like water features or sculptural elements. We decided that we would attract people through the smell of bread, for example, to the best parts of the restaurant, which are the fine dining area to the left of the conservatory and Opal at the end of the passage."

"Walking through the aisle is an experience. You have the exposed wine cellar, then you walk through the raw bar, going on to the pizza dining - with the pizza oven and high seating - and then you arrive at this hedge, and the cosy room with the views of The Pearl through the huge windows," says Deigo, taking us through the experience.

Rockwell Group was involved in the master plan and refurbishment of the Taj Hotel in Mumbai when the September terrorist attack happened. The design process took a completely new turn with Ratan Tata wanting the product ready within a year of the attack.

"It was a question of pride, to give a sense of hope and also to infuse the message that life goes

on even in the face of conflict, that Ratan Tata wanted to convey through the timely completion of the project," he says.

Reminiscing on the personality of Tata and his never-say-no demeanor, Diego says: "You will rarely meet such a grand personality. This was an attack on his own house and a lot of people in his team had passed away and it was a personal loss for him. But the way he handled it stoically while infusing positivity to the team was amazing."

"It was a challenge for us to work in a short time frame in India but we took it upon ourselves, and exactly a year after the attack the restaurants opened."

"I felt so proud to be part of the healing process, of infusing hope. The way Tata reinforced the heritage of Taj through this brave step was mind-blowing. He used architecture to infuse energy into the project. But it was also a painful experience; it was no longer about designing the interiors but also about pride and hope."

"It gave us all a sense of accomplishment at the end of the project. It was the most intense experiences that I had gone through," he says. This project, for Diego, reinforced the power of healing in architecture.

"And that is the truth," he says, glorifying P.L. Wright's design sensibilities. "We see the design as an experience, as a way of engaging people at an emotional level. It's not about a design award but it is about how we touch the masses through our work."

We strive to bring about that 'something' which transports guests to a better place of good food, superior lighting, comfortable ambience which makes it 'their' space. That 'something' is what we strive for." ■