

The One Who Got Away

One of the most prolific names in global F&B, Adam Tihany has been widely credited as a pioneer of restaurant design. From Four Seasons and Mandarin Oriental to One&Only and Westin, he has embarked on hotel projects that have defined the industry and bridged the gap between design and hospitality.

Words: Harry McKinley

A few minutes after arrival and we're shifting tables to follow the sun. It's a blazingly warm day in Paris and the starched white tablecloths of the terrace at La Réserve are playing host to glasses of chilled wine, iced teas and al fresco lunches. It's an apt spot to meet. The hotel is, in many ways, much like Tihany: classic but characterful, expensive looking but not ostentatiously so.

He's in a bright mood. On a day like this, so are most people, but it's clear from the way he immediately springs into conversation, having cheerfully debated table arrangements with the waiters, that he's an affable kind of guy. Prime eating site secured, trademark spectacles swapped for shades and we're already in full flow. He has a school reunion coming up and it's dominating his thoughts. It's been 50 years since he's seen many of those attending and, by all accounts, they're a successful bunch: members of parliament, doctors, lawyers – a veritable checklist of lofty professions.

Nonetheless his stature and international renown is likely to provide a focal point for conversation and, as such, he's feeling a little trepidation about the whole affair. As he readily admits, he's the 'one who got away'.

Tihany grew up in Jerusalem and, like many Israelis of his generation, he was often defined by a desire to chase the bright lights of Europe and America where, it seemed, opportunities were plentiful and life was more cosmopolitan. "I joined the military service in 1966 and in 1967 the Six Days War broke out. So instead of two years long, my military service became three," he explains. "By the time I was finished the only thing I knew I wanted to do was to leave the country and go somewhere else." Of course, four decades ago, that was a far from straightforward goal. The world seemed a much larger place and resources were less accessible. "My parents weren't well off enough to send me to the United States or to the UK, so I had to find a place that had public universities and subsidised education,

somewhere that was accepting students from Israel in the 60s. But, imagine, there was no Internet. Research was a very different ball game from today." In the end the only option he could find was Italy. Two faculties were taking on students and the contrast was stark: one was architecture in Milan and the other veterinary medicine in Bologna. "As I always say, the only thing I knew about architecture was that I didn't want to be a veterinarian," he says with a smile.

Tihany's candour is refreshing. Unlike many success stories, there's no pretense that he was a protégé from birth, instead he admits the initial stages of his journey were as much a matter of circumstance as choice. He certainly didn't disembark in Milan with a wealth of knowledge and a burning desire to design, nor does he imbue his experience with a rose tinted hue. "I didn't speak a word of Italian and I didn't know anything about architecture," he says. "I just happened to arrive in 1969, which was the height of the student movement and



Adam Tihany at the bar of The Grill by Thomas Keller on Seabourn Quest

Photography: William Hereford



Oro at the Belmond Cipriani Hotel, Venice

the social revolution. So from one war, which I understood, to another war I had no clue about, it was a pretty grim transition. This was the time when all of the great architects were unemployed and they changed their focus to furniture design, packaging and graphics. Because the universities were dysfunctional I had to work and study the profession the old fashioned way, like an apprentice. Eating and breathing it everyday you could say I became a designer by osmosis and training, rather than by reading books.”

What only becomes clear with the benefit of hindsight and the context of time is that Tihany had hit a swelling cultural wave that, when it broke, would sweep across the global design industry. The likes of Umberto Eco, Aldo Rossi and Paolo Portoghesi were all professors at the time and Tihany notes that it was the craft and culture of design that proved most formative as opposed to the structured, formal education process. Riding on the crest of revolution but battling a financial crisis, designers were using constraints to fuel innovation, spurred by a new way of looking at

the world and that which inhabits it. “This was the beginning of plastic furniture, of lighting design as we know it, it was the beginning of everything,” he says. “Being a part of that time, of that movement leaves a hefty sediment and it will always stay with me.”

Throughout these years Tihany’s American dream remained. The skyscrapers, smoking sidewalks and urban cacophony of New York City were etched on his mind. It was the idea of the place that continued to call to him, the vision of a world far removed from the dusty, wheat brown streets of Jerusalem and even the progressive but Euro-centric Milan.

By 1973 he had completed his studies and was working at a Milanese studio tasked with designing part of a major new exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Curated by Emilio Ambasz, the Argentine architect who would become known as an early proponent of ‘green architecture’, The New Domestic Landscape was an introduction to Italian design for the US. “It had a lot of resonance because, before that, the last big wave of design was Danish. There was nothing

international in between in terms of style,” says Tihany. “So after that exhibition a couple of American firms came to Milan looking to import a designer and start an Italian design studio.” Already one foot on the plane, he seized upon the opportunity and volunteered immediately. Suddenly the idea of the Big Apple was usurped by the real thing.

Tihany worked for the firm for several years but, after landing a large residential project, opened his own New York office in 1978. Back in Paris, almost three decades later, he drops another ice cube into a glass of rosé and, with a broad smile, leans back and notes, “and this is where the adventure really begins.”

A storyteller at heart, and arguably by craft, Tihany exudes the charisma of someone who has spent his life in a person-driven industry. In many ways he’s also a salesman: selling his ideas to clients and convincing them of their logic and appeal, then crucially having guests sold on the final design experience. Yet in his early days the greatest struggle was selling himself to those who couldn’t figure out which box to put him in. People would ask if he was

a product designer, a furniture designer, an architect or an interior designer. “All of the above,” he would say. “Give me a problem and I’ll design the solution.”

“Needless to say, I was starving for years,” he says; now making light work of a club sandwich. “Because people were very concerned about giving contracts to someone they couldn’t give a very narrow definition to. But I completely refused to pigeonhole myself. I didn’t want to succumb to the system. I adopted a stubborn mentality and an attitude of ‘I am how I am, you take it for what it is’, starving or not starving.”

Had it backfired we’d call it hubris of course, or idealism. But the fire in Tihany’s belly kept the hunger at bay and life would subsequently deal him an Ace, setting him on a trajectory towards international recognition. The year was 1980 and the setting was Studio 54. Tihany was approached by someone familiar with

embarking on projects throughout the world and working with numerous hotel groups. But the biggest difference between then and now, thinks Tihany, is the sheer popularity of food and drink. Eating out or grabbing a drink at a bar has become the lubricant for modern social interaction. “F&B spaces are really one of the main places that afford public access,” Tihany says. “You don’t have to spend a night at a hotel to enjoy its bar. It’s a way to communicate with design, to see what’s happening in the world. It used to be that every great architect always wanted to design a chair and it’s a great tribute to the industry that now it’s a restaurant. Which still has a lot of chairs of course.”

For Tihany the downside of a blossoming trade is the glut of those hopping on board who don’t ultimately add value. Amateurs he calls them, rather bluntly. It sounds direct, harsh even, but it doesn’t come from a place

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his work and asked if he’d be interested in designing a restaurant. Driven by a thirst to work and a desire to eat, he was definitive in his response: “I’ll design anything.”

The restaurant, it transpired, was a New York offshoot of Paris’s La Coupole and would be the first grand café in the city. The 225-seat Park Avenue spot would emulate the Art Deco style of the original, with Tihany responsible for everything from the interior architecture and furniture, to the graphics, lighting and china. “The restaurant opened in a huge snowstorm in 1981 but still people flocked. Andy Warhol couldn’t get in and from that point onwards it was the hottest ticket in town.”

Tihany was doing what he loved to do and the success of the project encouraged him to go and have a sign printed. It read: Adam Tihany, Restaurant Designer. In one fell swoop he had defined himself and birthed a profession. “I was the first person to ever call themselves a restaurant designer, so I have to take credit for the lousy invention,” he says.

Now of course, restaurant design is a thriving, self-sustaining industry and Tihany has progressed to global design stardom,

of conceit or even judgment, but out of his deeply held conviction that design should first and foremost be good design. He categorises the pros and the not-so-pros by splitting them into two camps: those who work in two dimensions and those who work in three. The third key dimension is depth. It’s not enough to cut and paste the ideas of others, or even to merely deliver exactly what the client asks for, there has to be substance and a point of view.

“Let me use an analogy,” says Tihany. “I’m a portrait artist. I create a portrait of my client. It’s my point of view, but it’s still a portrait. Take a hotel chef, it’s important that when they walk into their space, they feel it’s like a custom suit. As though somebody took their measurements. Then from the guest side, the space should be level with the expectation of what they’re going to get. You don’t want to walk into a place that screams formality and elegance and get served a grilled cheese sandwich.”

Tihany’s most recent hotel project was the Four Seasons DIFC in Dubai, for which he designed the interiors. He describes it in terms of the market as “a flea on a camel’s back,

but a very noisy flea.” The main restaurant, Firebird Diner, is a collaboration with chef and restaurateur Michael Mina and is an elevated take on classic Americana. From its windows one can take in an impressive view of the Downtown skyline. The juxtaposition between American diner and the polished, monolithic buildings of the Middle Eastern cityscape just beyond the glass highlights another of Tihany’s dividers: the ability to balance authenticity and pastiche.

For Tihany authenticity is an overused word, or more to the point an overly misused word. For him there can be no ‘authentic’ French bistro in New York City. Authenticity is about the reality, not the looks. “Authentically Rome is the obscure trattoria where the mother painted the walls herself and where the brother is bringing the food. You can’t duplicate that. You can have a New York style trattoria, for example, but don’t call it authentic. However, I try to avoid pastiche as much as possible. When I was designing the Mandarin Oriental in Las Vegas the client wanted contemporary with only a whiff of Asian. I had to explain to them that the location, Las Vegas, was as important as their brand identity. Las Vegas is ground zero for ‘theme’. I wasn’t going to produce a replica of a Chinese temple, but I wanted to play up two words: Mandarin and Oriental. When people hear those they don’t imagine a cold, cerebral, Armani-ish hotel. I had to convince the brand to amp up their image otherwise people wouldn’t get it. So that’s authentic, because that’s Las Vegas. When we worked on the King David Hotel, the question was always, what is the essence of Jerusalem? Well, for someone who grew up there, it’s one thing. For someone who visits, it’s another. Good design is about taking both of those perspectives into account. You can deduce which buttons you need to push to make the guest feel as though they are experiencing something local.”

For all of this talk of hotel F&B design, the interesting thing is that we’re having the conversation while sat on an outdoor terrace. Essentially the Paris streets, obscured by hedgerow, are our backdrop. Interior design is playing little role in our current experience of the hotel or indeed of the meal we’re sharing. When we raise this with Tihany he’s pragmatic in addressing the overall role that design plays in hotel F&B. “I can’t be presumptuous and say that a restaurant begins and ends with the



Per Se, New York City

design. People don't go to restaurants because they're hungry. If they're hungry they can open the fridge and make a sandwich," he says. "We go to restaurants, number one, to be with other people. So that experience is helped by service, by the food and then by design. Even now though, design is playing a role because you're sitting in a comfortable chair."

This sense of perspective came when Tihany opened his own restaurant, Remi, in 1987. He describes the first five years of the restaurant as the most formative of his career. Every designer that worked for him had to work at least once in the restaurant to gain an understanding of operations and it was here that he learnt that the front of house was only as good as the back of house. "A lot of designers think of the restaurant - the front of house - as a showroom," he explains, "and they don't really understand what it takes to run a restaurant. It really is a marriage between the two spaces. It's not just a flirt."

His most formative project meanwhile was the Aureole Wine Tower in Las Vegas, which was the result of an unlikely inspiration. "I will never forget the first day I was taken to see the space. There's a 50ft by 50ft hole in the ground and we are entering it at mid-level. I'm shown where the stairs are going to be and my gut reaction is to say, 'Why do you want to screw

up an architectural marvel? You're going to kill the space. The developer looks at me and says, 'Well what would you do?' Of course I had no idea but he gave me until 9am the next morning."

A long night ensued as Tihany dredged his brain for inspiration that wasn't forthcoming. Defeated, at 2.30am he turns on the television only to find Mission Impossible playing. "Tom Cruise is hanging in the middle of a white room and I realise, there it is. We're going to do a skyscraper in the middle, all glass, put the wine inside it and have girls fly up and down getting the wine, like wine angels. So I sketch it at 3.30am and I have a meeting with him at 9am. I'm describing it to and he's looking at me like I've lost my mind. He picks up his phone and I'm thinking, OK, security is on its way. But he connects to his assistant and says, 'Sally, cancel the bloody stairs.' Those are the moments. You either soar to the occasion or you get kicked out of an office."

Listening to Tihany recount both his entry into the F&B design industry and discuss some of his notable projects serves as a reminder of the sheer breadth of his work. He has no plans to retire of course, but he is at the stage where he's considering his legacy. Outside of his 'day job' he's on the boards of the Design Museum Holon in Tel Aviv and the Pratt Institute in

New York; and he is the creative director of both the Culinary Institute of America and Costa Cruises. His studio, for which he remains fully hands on, is in the process of renovating the Oberoi Hotel in New Delhi, is working on a series of restaurants at the Four Seasons Philadelphia and continues to work on the design of the luxury Seabourn cruise vessels, collaborating with chef Thomas Keller.

"More importantly I'm always curious about the world and how it's moving," he says. "I'm waiting patiently for filament lamps to fade out. That and farm-to-table. Some trends really do swallow the whole mid-market. I don't go for trends. Something trendy is already passé."

As the waiters clear the table and we begin the steady shuffle to collect belongings before heading into the Paris sun, we return to the school reunion. Is it really so worrisome? From Milan to Studio 54 he has quite the tale to tell. But for Tihany his story is perhaps the other way around. Having spent his younger years dreaming of escape, rising he says, "Someone very wise told me a long time ago, you'll never know where you're going to unless you remember where you came from. That summarises it for me. Wherever you came from will always be relevant. Celebrate it and pass it on." ●