

# A Life Creative

Designer Robert Angell has spearheaded some of the most recognisable and visually-enduring hotel bars and restaurants of this generation, but despite being icons of our time, he discusses why timelessness is at the forefront of his work and why classic will always be in style.

Words: Harry McKinley

The Collins Room, at London's The Berkeley, is a vision of cool grey, light-bouncing silver and muted lavender. Part of a dramatic refurbishment – that also included the Blue Bar, façade and lobby area – it plays host to the hotel's fashionable afternoon tea, as well as its all-day dining. It is named, of course, after the eminent David Collins – the designer who put the original Blue Bar on the map and was responsible for the revival of The Berkeley in the mid 2000s.

The Collins room, and freshly reimagined Blue Bar, are the work of his protégé, Robert Angell, who left David Collins Studio in 2010 to start his own design practice. In many ways it is a full circle for Angell – taking on a project that cemented his position as one of the foremost designers operating in the UK, but named for his former mentor. It seems a fitting spot to meet.

"I was so proud when the owner asked me to do this," says Angell, gesturing at the busy space around us. "To get the opportunity, now David is gone, is very moving. I wanted to evoke the timelessness that he managed to bring to projects, but I also had to answer

to the newness of what is happening today."

Angell has always been interested in design, or at the very least in creating things. Growing up on his family's farm he was constantly dissecting materials, as well as taking objects apart and putting them back together again. At school he gravitated towards the arts and describes working with wood as the spark that ignited his passion. He toyed with the idea of studying architecture at university, but decided the processes took too long, and so instead he opted for the relative immediacy of interior design. "There's an impatience in me and I want to create instantly," he says.

Long harbouring a desire to work in London, after a post-graduation stint in Leicester he moved to the big city and – through a recommendation from a friend – found himself working with David Collins. He would stay with the studio for 15 years. "It was a really beautiful part of my life," he recalls. "It was very hard work, but David and I got on and we created amazing things with the whole team there. He was a great mentor to me, and he used to say that I was a great mentor to the people who came through the studio.





Collins Room , The Berkeley, London

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We worked in a way that there were references to artists, sculptors and fashion, along with historic product, furniture and interior design. Up until probably the 80s and early 90s, no one really looked back in the way that they do now.”

It was in 2010 that Angell decided the time was right to fly the comfortable environs of Collins’ studio. It was a period of recession and so Angell’s move was a gutsy one. There was no guaranteeing personal success at the best of times, but the challenge was even greater when purse strings were tightening across the hospitality industry. Nonetheless he says he had a “sixth sense that people were looking for things to be done differently.” Early projects, like Chelsea’s Five Fields, help him define his approach and show the industry the kind of designer he was: luxury, naturally, with a nod to tradition but with his eyes on the future.

“I think it’s important for design to wear in as opposed to wear out,” he says, “but luxury is a difficult word. For a start it’s insanely overused. Luxury is simplicity of touch and details. Look at the handbags in this room, they’re all stunningly designed but different. People are very aware of the detail of what they’re buying and what they’re spending their money on. So dyeing the yarn for each colour in the soft furnishings for this room and developing the fabrics specifically – with

Northern Ireland-based textile designer Jude Cassidy – is luxury, and designing every piece of furniture in here is luxury. We bring pieces that are individual and bespoke to interiors. It’s easy to pick stuff off the shelf, it’s difficult to design.”

From the Art Deco glitz of The Savoy to the easy comfort of New Forest’s Lime Wood, Angell has worked extensively in hotels – providing F&B spaces that speak to their respective audiences. Certainly Angell demonstrates a keen sense of the evolution of the industry and the shift in hotel F&B from overt formality to a more relaxed and experience-driven approach. Understandably, it’s a transition he’s had to take into account in his own work, blending dignified design with an air of effortlessness. “People are working, chilling, socialising, even chatting people up in a space that everyone wants to be in,” he says, discussing the modern atmosphere of hotel bars and restaurants. “With The Blue Bar and Collins Room, they’re formal spaces but people come to have a good time. If you wanted to eat, for example, in the lobby or the bar, you used to be told they’re not open. That mentality has changed. It allows all of the public spaces in a hotel to have an F&B angle, and that’s exciting. We like being together, and creating that culture in hotels is amazing and a change from the ideas of yesterday.” For him, success in creating that ‘buzz’ is down to attracting locals. “Getting them active in your hotel restaurant or bar is key,” he says. “It’s the locals that have the charm, wit, knowledge and sense of fun that is infectious to other people, particularly guests staying at the hotel.”

Legs crossed, smartly dressed in a blazer and shirt, and sipping on a cup of tea from The Berkeley’s Wedgwood collection, Angell cuts



Kaspar's at The Savoy, London

a rather British figure. There is little about him that is ostentatious or crying to be noticed. On the one hand he's perhaps the antithesis of some of his projects, spaces that capture the attention and beg to be observed. On the other, he's a fitting reflection of their quiet sophistication, where even though the design flourishes may be extravagant, one never gets the feeling his bar and restaurant projects are yelling too loudly. "I suppose we're developing a style that becomes English," he says, when quizzed on whether he considers his aesthetic to be influenced by his home turf. "Having learnt my trade here, and knowing and reading about English designers – whether it's Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Terence Conran or Tom Dixon – I'm always designing with those peers in mind." Equally, he gleans immense inspiration from the great modernists; architects primarily, who were pioneering in their day but have come to define good design and contemporary standards. "I love Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson; everything about their approach and thinking. Van der Rohe is famously credited as saying 'God is in the detail', and I appreciate the notion that everything should be planned out to the nth degree. Looking back at those icons of modernist design works in terms of what we know now. It probably wasn't appreciated at the time, but their work has since come to be seen as timeless and beautiful."

Angell's place in the vanguard of design is already assured. He may call it good fortune, others may call it a result of his cultivated talent, but he has spearheaded the kinds of projects that carry legacy and, unquestionably, prestige. His influences play out in his designs – the

strident, clean lines of van der Rohe seen in the uncluttered way he deals with furniture or Johnson's consideration for subtlety displayed in the layered approach to texture – but these are combined with an understanding of genuine modernity; not just in design, but in how we live and behave. He discusses the need to take into account the importance of social media, describing how each scheme should provide guests with a reminder to take a snap. In a grander sense he's cognisant of the changing cycle of hospitality and the need to engineer longevity into his work, without veering into visual territory that feels dated. It's a difficult balance. "You get a new opening one week and everyone is raving about it, and the next week those same people are somewhere else," he says. "I remember a time when there was a restaurant opening every week in London, and then once or twice a year there would be a big hotel opening. Now, you have half a dozen restaurants opening every day and a hotel opening every week almost. That's the way the world is changing."

Next for Angell is Principal Birmingham, the latest in a line of openings for the brand, but he already has his eye on a future beyond what is already on the books. "There's a constant desire to do something new and exciting over and over again," he says, with a glint of that child from the farm getting inspired by the objects around him. "As designers it's up to us to do something fresh and inspiring, but in a way that allows it to stick around for a while." And whilst our tea may now be cold, we suspect that destinations like Collins Room will be hot for years to come. ●