



INTERVIEW WITH HARRY MCKINLEY

Harry McKinley is a hospitality consultant and journalist, writing regularly for the likes of Wallpaper, Hospitality Design and The Telegraph.*

EDITOR: How has the concept of luxury evolved over the years in relation to hospitality and why do you think this change has come about?

HARRY MCKINLEY: There was a time when luxury was, in many ways, defined by a price point. But greater consumer savvy and the prominence of thoughtful, independent operators has seen quality become more democratic. Today we expect - even demand - beautiful, well conceived design, great produce and enriching experiences as much of our neighbourhood coffee shop as we do of a five-star hotel. It's precipitated a rethink in how we define luxury and, for me, that now means style with substance, provenance and a focus on compelling storytelling. Modern luxury is found in 'uniqueness' and a sense of detail, where the smallest component is as considered as the grand sweep.

EDITOR: What do you predict the definition of luxury with regards to hospitality will be in 50 years?

HARRY MCKINLEY: Post-luxury often equals a stripping away of the meaningless and the boringly superficial. We're already entering an age in which a culture of excess is seen as dangerously unsustainable, and so I feel that luxury in hospitality will see a new emphasis on value-driven thinking and on essentialism, with the role of design developing to prioritise function over aesthetics. Luxury will be the gift of time, with hospitality spaces providing room to breathe in increasingly busy lives. And, finally, I feel luxury will represent creative thinking, as hotels, bars and restaurants evolve so that we may continue to live and work socially in a world with diminished resources.

EDITOR: How can you create new experiences for clients that stand the test of time or does one need to create endlessly new experiences?

HARRY MCKINLEY: Even the experiences we now think of as timeless were, at some point, new and untested, so in many ways there's a lot to be learnt from the restaurants, bars and hotels that have successfully stayed the course. What they often have in common is a strong grip on the fundamentals: a great offer, an appealing environment, solid service and cultural resonance. It's possible to originate, and even innovate, while getting these basics right. It's in the constant pursuit of the new for new's sake, that these aspects can get lost in dreaded gimmickry or in too much concern for trends that - by their nature - will come and go. 'Newness' will put bums on seats initially, but it's the quality of an experience that will see them returning. In my opinion, longevity comes in experiences that cut to the heart of what people want and that are flexible enough and robust enough to remain relevant in changing times.

EDITOR: What is your ultimate luxury hospitality experience?

HARRY MCKINLEY: For me true luxury is a sense of escape, and it's here that the hospitality industry has an incredible role to play in transporting people beyond the everyday. That means pulling up a seat at an Indian eatery in the heart of London and being carried to the backstreets of historic Bombay, or closing my hotel room door in Singapore and stepping into a 1920s vision of the city, where my mobile phone is thankfully defunct. My ultimate luxury hospitality experience is, in short, anything that allows me to leave behind the ordinary in exchange for the extraordinary, even if it's only for as long as it takes me to finish a cocktail or enjoy a meal.

EDITOR: In your opinion, what role does technology play in luxury hospitality? How has digitalization changed the industry?

HARRY MCKINLEY: When it comes to luxury hospitality, technology offers convenience and allows us to make more confident choices - whether that's a streamlined booking system, room service at the touch of a screen or the simple ability to check a menu online before making a reservation. But the digital landscape in which we live has changed the nature of guest expectations. Thanks to the array of polished images and story-rich text neatly curated online, we form an idea of a place before passing through the door. Luxury restaurants, bars and hotels are now challenged to make sure that idea is matched, or ideally exceeded, by the 'real thing'. I think the role of technology is one that has to be thoughtfully balanced, however. When the pendulum swings too far in a direction that disconnects us from experiences, we hanker for the tangible; we chose vinyl over iTunes, hardbacks over Kindles and film photography over digital. Sure, technology can bring ease and expediency, but as that relates to luxury hospitality, those benefits aren't always a substitute for authentic interactions with a knowledgeable waiter or the joyous 'analogueness' of slotting a heavy brass key into a hotel room door.