

# Hospitality Interiors

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Head of Design, Areen Design

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With over 35 years' experience delivering exceptional interior design and cost-effective procurement solutions to an international client base, Areen Design works efficiently and effectively to make its clients' vision a reality.

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**Could you tell us about your career to date?**

Many years ago – too many to put a number on – I began my career in design working on restaurants and night clubs in Amsterdam, where I lived for six years in my 20s. Returning to London, I continued to design F&B outlets, as well as formalising my knowledge by gaining a degree in interior design.

In the mid-90s I relocated to Hong Kong, designing F&B, retail and office spaces. The company I worked for moved me to Singapore as MD of their regional HQ, where I began designing hotels for the first time. Later, I moved to Hirsch Bedner Associates in Singapore, honing my craft alongside Michael Bedner himself – a fantastic leader and tutor, who back in the 60s, together with Howard Hirsch, developed modern hospitality design as a professional discipline.

Moving back to London with my young family, I worked at HBA London before being

asked to join Richmond International.

In 2008, I was tasked with setting up a new hospitality division within their group company, Areen Design, to handle the multitude of projects which didn't fit the Richmond brand. This was the year the financial crisis hit, creating a worldwide recession – challenging times for a new design studio!

Our first projects were a Raffles and Fairmont in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, which kept the studio growing in a difficult socioeconomic environment.

**Tell me about your role at Areen Design ...**

As head of design, I'm involved in and monitor all aspects of a project, from initial client contact, brief, narrative and concept development, through to documentation and on-site installation. I believe we can only continue to develop and grow as a studio if we invest in our talent – I have a strong

commitment to helping young designers develop their talents and individual design skills. Hopefully, I can pass on my experience to the next generation of designers, in much the same way that Michael Bedner guided me in my early career.

For me, the concept for each project is anchored in the site, situation and cultural condition of the building and the community it inhabits. A design can only be considered truly successful if it achieves integration with its local environment, physically through design intervention and emotionally as a part of the community. Functionality and efficiency drive returns for the client, but design and operational integration into each project's locality creates a personality, a character which people can really interact with. We try to achieve this level of integration in all of our projects, hoping to positively impact each community through development.

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The Social House, Nairobi



Westin Palace, Madrid

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**What three words would you use to describe Areen Design?**

At Areen Design, we have extensive experience across architecture, interiors and procurement management. I don't feel our unique qualities should be restricted to three words, but if I had to choose I'd say we are creative, agile and experienced. But there's also innovative, credible and reliable!

**Turning to the topic of authenticity of experience, how do you approach each project?**

Research. It's important to understand your guests – this is often a team effort, with the client and operator having carried out their own research. We build on that to agree key personas or guest personalities that we can use to tailor the experience.

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What can we discover, and how do we share that with our guests?

We begin by creating a thorough narrative that illustrates the many facets of the experience that we have tailored to appeal to our guest personas. There is always something that stands out, that we can use as a design catalyst – people, places, crafts or industries, for example.

We recently created two very different narratives for completely different projects, the first for a new tropical resort on the Kenyan coast, set amidst mangrove thickets. The local people, and their crafts and stories, led us to create the character of an indigenous explorer and his magical journeys meeting mystical creatures and sea life!

For a new-build Fairmont in a completely new city in the desert outside Cairo, eschewing the standard tropes of pyramids and pharaohs, we conjured a Victorian-era traveller and his descendants, who became

hoteliers, driven to share the fruits of their explorations with their guests.

Whereas for the renovation of the Royal Suite of the Westin Palace Madrid, we completed a thorough analysis of the hotel's fascinating history within the context of the city, which delivered clear experiential themes, equal parts revival and innovation.

These narratives, agreed by the project/client team, function as the design foundation to which we refer throughout the design stages and into the operational stages, keeping the final design aligned with the original vision.

**How important are public spaces in hotels? Are there ways in which you've used innovative design in these areas to facilitate innovative usage?**

Public areas are pivotal in any hotel. They are the connection between the hotel guests and local guests – the stage for the kind



of integration we've been discussing. The definition of this space is changing, and so there must be a level of flexibility of use or function designed into them. As designers, we need to anticipate these changes in order to create a successful intervention, that can create a community hub and boost revenue for the property.

Our latest hotel in Nairobi, The Social House, avoided clear definitions of reception, cafe and lounge, encouraging guests to use the places we designed in the ways that suited them best, creating a spontaneous condition or happenstance, where the spaces respond to their users rather than the other way around.

**Do designers think about loyalty when they design a hotel, or is it just an operator's concern?**

We want guests to return and to tell their networks. We take the view that we're

designing for the long term and that a fundamental part of our responsibility is to safeguard our client's business, through maintaining and evolving the guest experience. This cannot be achieved through design alone – it's a close partnership between design and operation.

**How high on the list is revenue creation for designers?**

The success of a property can be interpreted in a number of ways, but it's clear that having happy, paying guests is an important indicator. The guest experience is the foremost way to influence that – so yes, revenue generation should be high on the list for designers.

In terms of cost management, we ensure we understand the client's brief and how it will impact the fabric of the building, and propose the design solutions that best fit the budget and brand. We don't waste space – every square metre costs our client and impacts

their guests. We must balance design and operational considerations to deliver a stand-out space which works and is attractive to guests.

**How do you think the influence of new technology affects luxury travellers today, and could do in the future?**

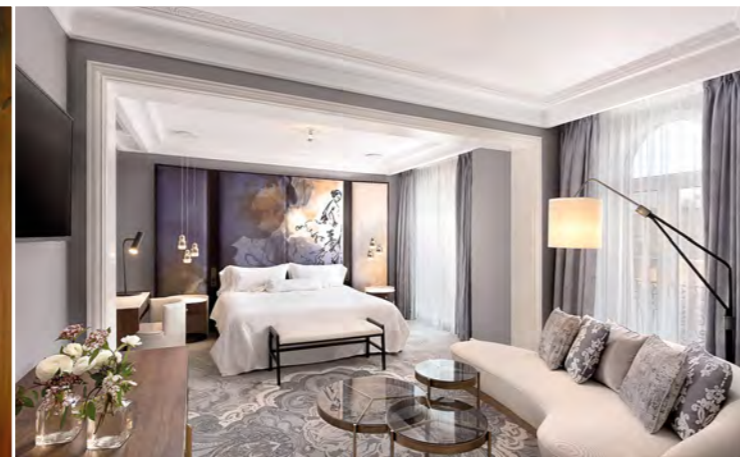
How do you define luxury? For some, it might be space – a 75m<sup>2</sup> room, for example, but an empty loft has that quality. For others, it might be furniture and finishes, or service levels. The key to using technology in any hospitality environment is for its use to improve the guest experience, to make a function or state easier to achieve.

I've stayed in a room with 32 light switches; I had to ask someone to show me what each one did and what the graphics on those switches meant. To look at it another way: do you read a book or tablet at bedtime? Both are examples of the same technology but

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thousands of years apart, both functional yet each purvey a different quality of experience. In short, use solutions that speak to your guest profile, and keep it simple.

**With so many hospitality designers in the industry, how does Areen Design stand out?**

We are lucky enough to be part of huge and varied design community, both here in London and internationally. And while that presents competition, it can be in a positive way, driving you to grow and develop, to innovate and even collaborate.

What sets us apart? Aside from the many unique and talented voices in our design team, I'd say it's being able to create a space where all those personalities can come together to create a cohesive solution for our clients, and then being able to deliver those solutions. We have a 35+ year reputation for delivering, and our hospitality clients know that applies to all areas of a project – from narrative and

concept development, through to making those ideas work on-site and to budget. That means high-quality, super-detailed documentation. As many of our projects are overseas, all our drawings and specifications need to communicate our design intent effectively.

Finally, when the project is finished and open, we go back and talk to staff and guests alike, working with our clients to discover how different areas are performing and if any adjustments are required.

**Where do you see hotel design going in the future?**

It's difficult to give a concise answer to such a broad question. The very definition of a hotel echoes that breadth – from the caravanserai on the Silk Road a thousand years ago to the gleaming palaces of Dubai today, and a million spaces in between. There will always be a need for a place to take shelter, to eat,

refresh, entertain and interact with the local community.

But what we deliver as designers is a response to our clients' and their guests' needs – it's a conversation, and by its very nature it is in constant motion. I don't think anyone can predict the turns it will take in any detail, but we can all agree that it will continue to change and evolve as our communities do.

One element we can see coming to the fore at the moment is the guest's hunger for authenticity and experience – to not only visit a place, but to experience its culture.

**Is there anything exciting you're working on that you can tell us about?**

We're looking forward to seeing the opening of the Raffles Doha in time for the World Cup this year. We collaborated closely with the Marcel Wanders studio in Amsterdam to deliver a completely different style of super-luxury hotel.



On a different scale, we've just started the design of a fantastic new brand, 'lifestyle' hotel in London. Can't tell you anything more about that yet – but watch this space.

In the meantime, like many design studios, we are working on some astonishing mega-projects in Saudi Arabia – but again, it's all hush-hush for the time being. Areen Design has had a major presence in KSA for many years, and we anticipate opening a dedicated office there within the next year.

Finally, given the unprecedented experiences of the last couple of years, we took the opportunity to review the way we work and run our business. We have transformed our systems and empowered our staff to a much greater extent. We tripled the size of our library and founded a research and development team. We will be bringing new ideas to market soon – come back for more news later this year.

**What career achievement are you most proud of?**

I've worked on many diverse and exciting projects, too many to enumerate here. Instead, I'll focus on another side of my work – I have a lasting sense of achievement for the number of young designers I've nurtured over the years. It's satisfying to see how many of them have gone on to become confident, skilled professionals. I hope they will, in turn, encourage the next generation.

**What would be your dream hotel project?**

I've been waiting years for a client to say, 'Andrew, take as long you need and spend as much as you want!' I'm beginning to suspect that won't happen. But, working with an ambitious client, who wants to make a responsible impact and understands the pivotal role interior design and architecture can play in that, is probably a dream which has been realised in parts and more, over the course of

my career. The simple answer, however, is 'the next one' ...

**What's next for you and Areen Design?**

Having made it through the pandemic, we're pleased to see the industry regaining lost ground. That period of pause gave us the opportunity to enact reform across our business and studio. We are now embarking on a period of expansion into new sectors and geographies. We have recruited some inspirational, talented and experienced designers to head up our new division, Commercial/Workplace.

For Hospitality, we will continue our search for opportunities within the 'lifestyle/boutique' market, to offer not only interior design, but other complementary disciplines, such as branding and product design. Finally, for our high-end private residential projects, we are expanding our base from the Middle East to Europe and, in particular, the UK.

[www.areen.com](http://www.areen.com)

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