

Hospitality Interiors

INTERIOR DESIGN FOR HOTELS, RESTAURANTS, BARS & CLUBS

Issue 66 | July - August 2016



Craftwood Interiors' luxury bespoke seating, GBK Southampton

Having held senior posts at several renowned hospitality design firms and with a mighty roster of projects the world over, Andrew Linwood – head of design at Areen Hospitality – has an uncommonly rich insight into the global hospitality market. Andrew’s passion for interiors with provenance, his understanding of the diverse and individual requirements of international guests, and his extensive work in emerging markets are just some of the topics Hospitality Interiors’ Gemma Ralph wished to pick his brain on when she visited Areen Hospitality’s Chiswick home ...

Andrew Linwood, Areen Hospitality



For those who are unfamiliar with Areen Hospitality: a brief history. Founded in 2008, the practice is the hospitality design arm of Areen Design, which is in turn the sister company to Richmond International. While Richmond is of course renowned for its specialist work at the five-star, luxury end of the market, the modus operandi of Areen Hospitality is to capture and harness the enormous potential offered by developing markets.

Andrew himself was aware of the untapped potential of this sector for some time prior to the existence of Areen Hospitality. After a decade working across Asia – in Hong Kong as MD of regional interiors group GTD, and then as a senior project designer for Hirsch Bedner Associates in Singapore – Andrew felt the alienating effect of London prices keenly upon his return to the UK.

“I had a lot of clients from Singapore, for example, who would call me in London and say ‘Andrew I want you to do me a hotel’, and I would send them a fee proposal based on London prices and never hear from them again,” Andrew explains.

“It was clear that we needed an alternative model to capture that kind of business. I spoke to Michael Bedner about it in the early noughties, and when I moved to Richmond International I made the same proposal to the managing director there, who really bought into the idea.

“We originally called ourselves Areen Hotel Design and then we changed it to Areen Hospitality so that we could broaden our offering.”

Eight years on, and Areen Hospitality has already achieved a staggering amount – growing from a team of two to one of 25, designing – amongst many other notable projects – a 1562 key Swissôtel in Makkah, and extending its global network with partner offices in Delhi, Cairo, Lagos, Dar es Salaam and Moscow.

The firm provides services in everything from interior architecture and creative interior concept design through site installation, artwork consultancy and FF&E design and specification. As part of the Areen Design brand, Areen Hospitality also profits from access to a large in-house procurement and purchasing team led by Niklaus Lünow. Operating since 1985, this team has built an extensive and ever-expanding network of international suppliers, and wields significant purchasing power as a result of its unparalleled expertise and reputation.

Given, or perhaps as a result of, the geographical breadth of Areen Hospitality’s portfolio, it is difficult to pin down a ‘signature style’ as such. Indeed, Andrew believes strongly in rooting his designs in the landscape and communities in which they are built.

“The days of you walking into a hotel and not knowing if you’re in Freetown or Frankfurt are long gone, at least for us they are,” he says. “Guests want that local experience and it’s all about how we as designers can help to reflect that.”

The Cape Sierra Hilton in Freetown is a classic example of the cultural sensitivity and awareness of Andrew’s designs. Expressing a proud, yet uncontrived sense of heritage, the hotel – which is set to open in 2017– conforms to the design demands of a Hilton branded hotel, while acting as a viable and attractive option for local residents.



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Cape Sierra Hilton, Freetown, Sierra Leone - V Society Bar



Cape Sierra Hilton, Freetown, Sierra Leone - Lobby Lounge with 3D sculptural wall

“We’re very proud of this project, as we did a lot of research into West Africa to try and reflect the cultural context of where it is,” says Andrew. “We drew in particular upon the fluidity of Sierra Leone’s culture and landscape, creating a 3D sculptural wall in the reception that is inspired by the water from the coast that comes in as little estuaries.”

“Rather than install generic artwork in the bar, we incorporated photos of established local Sierra Leonean residents, artists and fashion designers on the wall in the bar – we wanted to promote Freetown society.”

As much as Andrew embraces the unique expertise and materials available to him, some of the locations in which he works can pose significant challenges.

“Our designers in the studio understand that you’ve got to be aware of the skillsets available to you in the locations you’re working in,” he explains. “What you can design and build in Germany is not the same as what you can build in Lagos, where the technology and skillsets are just not as available. Take Sierra Leone for example, it has no indigenous furniture industry, and everything has to be delivered by boat.”

“It’s a body of knowledge that you build up after working on

projects from Eastern Europe, to the Middle East, across Africa and in the Far East, you learn from that experience.”

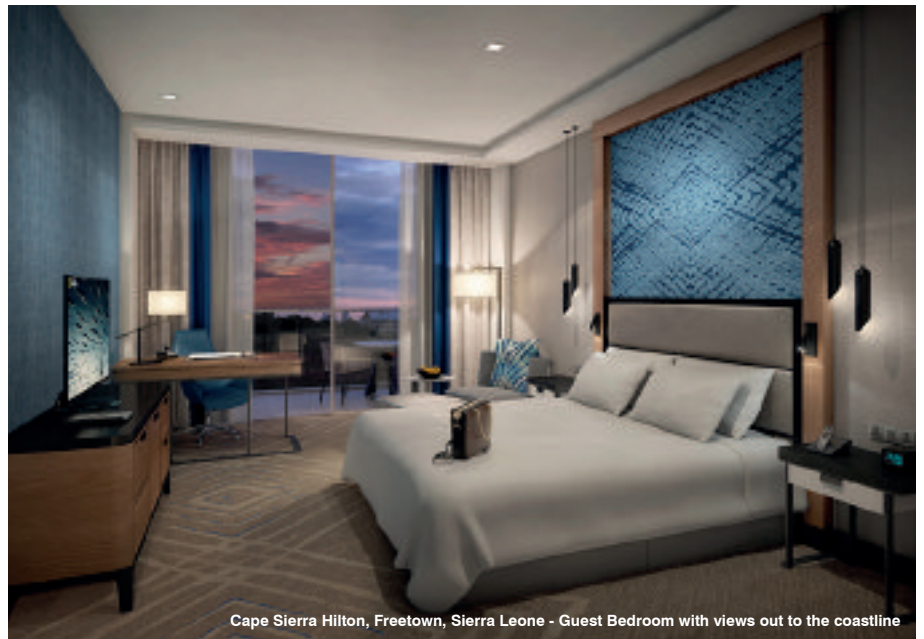
Perhaps one of the biggest challenges from a cultural perspective, however, has been Areen Hospitality’s work in the pilgrim market. Two of the firm’s very first projects were a Swissôtel and Raffles in Makkah – which in fact saw the company through the rocky depths of the recession shortly after launching – and more recently Andrew has worked as part of the design team on the world’s largest Holiday Inn – Al Azizia Holiday Inn, Makkah.

“There are just so many things you need to know about the kinds of guests that will use these hotels,” explains Andrew.



Al Azizia Holiday Inn, Makkah, Saudi Arabia - Lobby Lounge

“The owner, especially in the developing markets we work in, often has very high expectations, while the operator is looking for a return on investment – our job is to bring their interests together, which can be tricky”



Cape Sierra Hilton, Freetown, Sierra Leone - Guest Bedroom with views out to the coastline



One Park Villa, Shanghai, China - Daughter's study in a private residence.

“First-time travellers from say Indonesia, Pakistan or the Philippines, for example, might be coming from a small village and may never have stayed in a 4 or 5-star hotel.

“Pilgrims can become emotional – it’s a spiritual event, a once in a lifetime experience that they’re undertaking and you really do have to take into consideration how people may react to being in a particular space. The selection of materials used within the space is important; they have to be really robust when you have tens of thousands of people funnelling down a corridor.”

Aside from meeting the needs of this very niche guest base, the Swissôtel and Holiday Inn projects in particular posed a significant logistical challenge. “The concept of how you circulate people around these spaces safely is really important,” Andrew explains. “For example we created two 2500m² restaurants for Swissôtel Makkah, because you’ve got a lot of hungry people who, at Ramadan for instance, may all want to eat at the same time.

“We actually looked at examples in Las Vegas of how to feed these quantities of people and still give them the sense that they’re getting that hotel environment – these are not canteens after all, they’re buffet restaurants.

“That thought process extends all the way through to how you would design a queuing system to get 2000 diners into the restaurant, whether particular dietary needs might affect the layout, or how hand basins can be incorporated.”

Of course, as well as meeting the diverse needs and expectations of guests, pleasing both operator and owner can also be a delicate balancing act for Andrew, particularly in the

emerging markets in which he specialises. “The tricky thing about what we do, and it’s true of all our competitors as well, is that you almost have two clients,” he says. “The owner, especially in the developing markets we work in, often has very high expectations, while the operator is looking for a return on investment – our job is to bring their interests together, which can be tricky.

“Take lighting for example. Operators understand just how important it is to have a sophisticated lighting system, but many clients don’t. A lot of our work, especially in developing markets, is about educating the client or the developer. While the big hotel chains insist on having an established, experienced hotel designer, clients often don’t see the value; they don’t understand what we bring.”

While large hotel chains appreciate the exacting standards of their customer-base, and use diverse lifestyle brands to ensure they reach every sector of this audience, their size can still pose a problem when it comes to responding quickly.

“We love the big hotel brands, but the challenge for us as commercial interior designers is how we bring them round to the way the market is moving, which is more fractured, more individual let’s say,” explains Andrew.

This concept of ‘individuality’ has become key in recent times, as the demand grows for hotel interiors with a more bespoke, residential feel. Aspirational, certainly, but with the comfort and personality of a domestic environment.

“We all live in much more luxurious accommodation now than we did a generation ago, but not only are people’s expectations higher, they’re also different,” says Andrew.

“You want a space that’s flexible; you don’t really want to walk in to a guest room and see a bed, desk and TV, you want something that’s going to blend those activities. I know that, travelling as an architect or a designer, I often have great big rolls of drawings, which I prefer to spread out across the bed rather than use a formal desk.”

Andrew’s all-time favourite hotel is proof that this intuitive, intimate style can be as, or even more powerful than all-out glamour. “There is a small boutique hotel in New Delhi called The Manor,” he says. “It was an old bungalow and was remodelled about 10 years ago by some Japanese designers. There’s maybe a dozen rooms; there’s no room service because you pad out of your room in your socks and go to the bar and ask for a beer and go back again.

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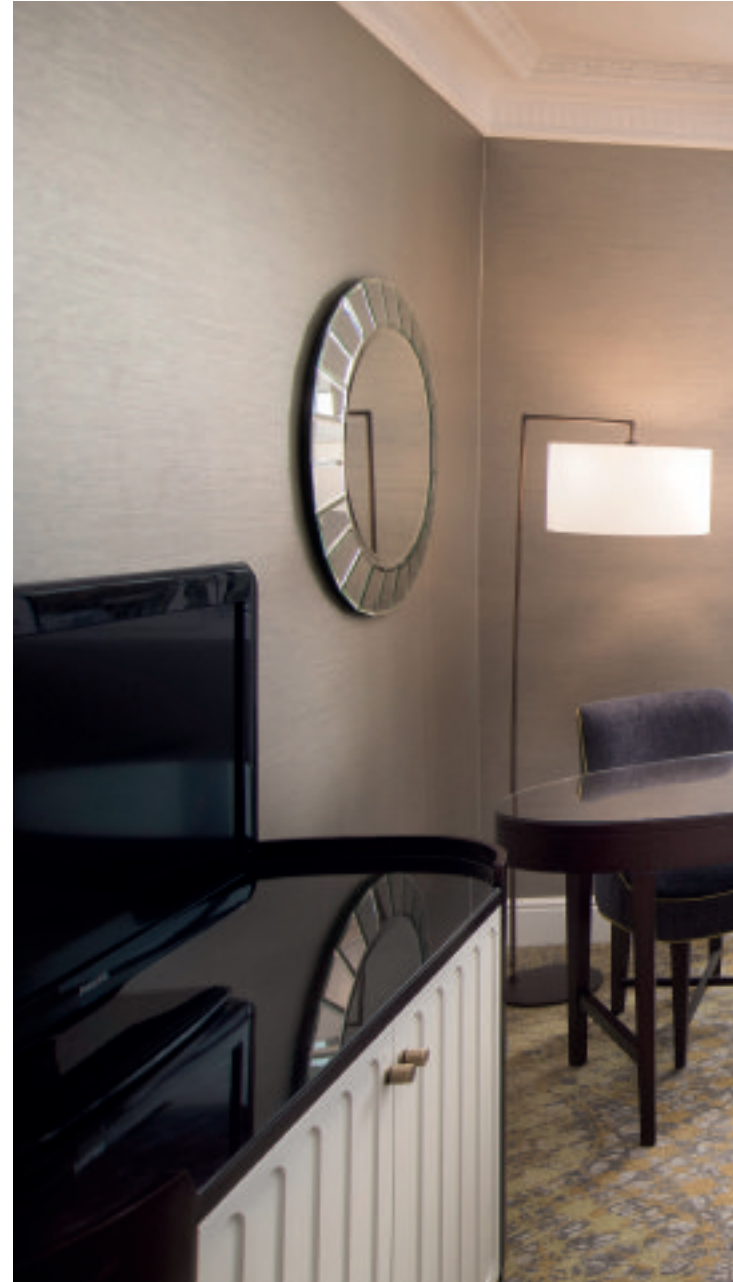
“It’s very small, very simple and it’s not swanky, but it’s nice, it’s stylish. Because it’s small it’s very personal, they know who you are when you come in.”

This topic naturally flows to a discussion in the upsurge of guests making use of serviced apartments, or the likes of AirBNB – Andrew himself a real advocate of their offering. “If I’m travelling with my family, we rarely stay in hotels,” he says. “We’ve always picked apartments, and there are various reasons for that. One is cost of course, if you’re travelling with three kids. The other is convenience and that’s the most important thing, the idea that you can make a cup of tea or feed your children when it’s convenient.

“The other big thing is context. We were in San Francisco last summer and we stayed in a whole series of apartments, one in particular with a little courtyard with half a dozen families and couples, and you’d bump into them as you went in and out, and chat with them. It’s as if you’re part of the community, and that is what we should be bringing into hotels.

“You do find it in certain places. You stay in some hotels and there’s no food offer, but they get street food vans to pull up outside, so you can grab something and get back to your laptop. You’re becoming partners with the local business, the local community. That’s a way forward.”

Talking of ‘home’, exciting developments are afoot for Areen



Hospitality in their home market. At present, all of the firm's activity is overseas, but Andrew is now keen to expand Areen Hospitality's footprint in the UK. "When we started, our first few projects were in the Middle East, people saw them and it started the ball rolling for us out there, but during the last year or two we've started to turn our focus to the UK market," he says. "We're looking at a lot of projects with the big operators, whether it's IHG, Hilton, Accor, Marriott – all have pipelined projects in the UK, which we're pitching for."

"What's also interesting in the UK market is the burgeoning independent hotel market, we're talking to a couple of different developers who want to start new brands. It would be great fun to develop a new brand and roll that out, because it gives you the opportunity to create something from scratch without having a brand standards manual to abide by. So that's what we're looking to do and where we see expansion. It's our home market; we should and will have a presence here."

Given Andrew's proven insight and expertise, it will be exciting to see what he and his talented team have to offer on their home turf. Watch this space!

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Sheraton, Dushanbe, Tajikistan - Reception featuring artwork by a local artist.



Westin Palace, Madrid, Spain - The guest bedroom concept integrates motifs found in Spanish lacework with botanical-inspired patterns and colours.