The Washington Post

Thursday, October 1, 2009

At W Hotel, Steal the Ideas, Not the Robes

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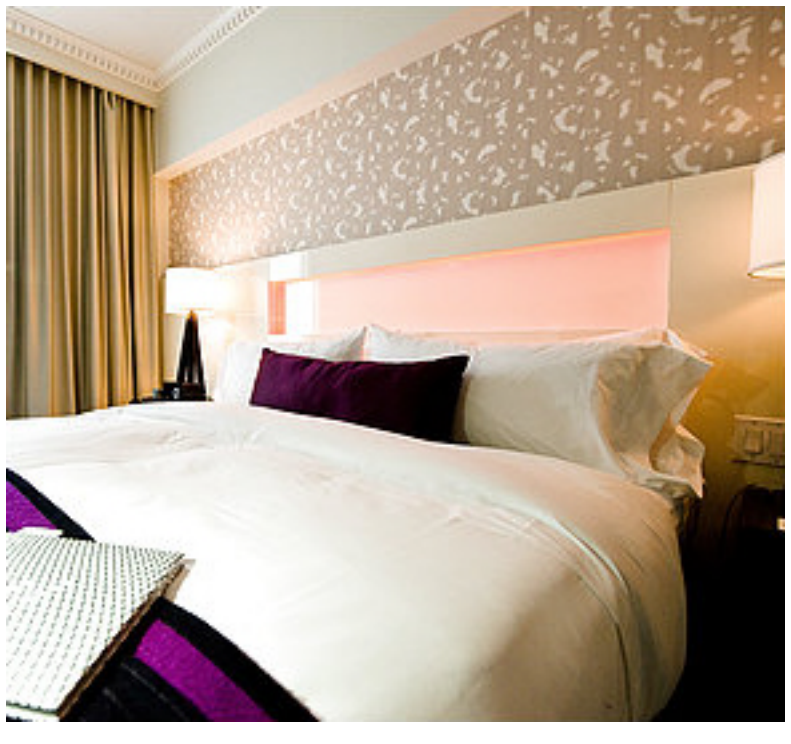
All those fashionistas rushing through the new W Hotel lobby to make the scene at the rooftop bar may be missing the splashy design details that could soon end up in bedrooms, baths and living rooms across the region.

The $90 million makeover of Washington's former Hotel Washington, which reopened in July, rebooted the dated lobby chandeliers by plugging in LED lights and dressed up bathrooms with bronze vessel sinks. In the bedrooms, the headboard for the 11-inch thick, plush-top mattresses is a built-in niche, backlit with amber light. Although the walls are neutral (Benjamin Moore's China White), fuchsia cashmere throws and silk-like bolsters add color. While preserving the elaborate plaster moldings, columns and graceful arches of the 92-year-old building, Los Angeles designer Dianna Wong brought spaces into the 21st century with digital fireplaces and faux-snow-leopard pillows.

The Hotel Washington opened in 1917 and closed on Dec. 31, 2007. The Beaux-Arts building, known for its location a block from the White House, became a landmark for its open-air rooftop terrace with panoramic views. Now, its 317 rooms, Bliss Spa and J&G Steakhouse from celebrity chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten have a modern edge poised to give consumers a design wake-up call.

"Hotels offer serendipitous ways to look at sleeping, bathing, eating and working," says Wong, who is flying in next week for the hotel's formal opening festivities. "They can reawaken people to luxury and a sense of discovery missing in many lives, which are so busy and so controlled. People leave a hotel saying, 'I can re-create some of this in my house.' "

Wong's W bedrooms and baths provide inspiration for creating restful, well-appointed interiors that maximize space. By using white lacquer built-in desks and cabinets, Wong made rooms appear larger and avoided the cluttered look of a room full of brown furniture. Instead of a bulky entertainment unit, she designed a streamlined three-shelf unit for the flat-screen TV.



Rooms at the new W Hotel have backlit headboards and wallpaper accents.

Find Modern Inspiration at Washington's New W Hotel

Warm lighting is key. A miniature recessed night light in a room's entry can be switched on from the bedside. "It's much nicer than those plug-ins," says Wong. She thinks accent walls are good focal points in small spaces and in some rooms used soft gray and lavender wallpaper above the bed to add luminosity. The shag carpeting is silvery-gray, and the low pile feels soft and luxurious under bare feet. The desk accessories are covered in white leather, and the desk chair, in faux-crocodile silver leather, is both beautiful and ergonomic.

In many of the bathrooms, Wong mirrored the wall behind the sink to open up the space, then hung a framed silver-leaf mirror on top. A small fridge is tucked under the sink. "There is a trend for refrigeration in the bathroom, so you can keep water bottles, vitamins, medicine or even makeup in there," says Wong. She commissioned shower pans of engineered marble, which Wong says will eliminate stains around the drain.

Already, the hotel, one of 32 in the W Hotel chain, has become a glitterati watering hole. Guests in the rooms, rooftop lounge and wine bar have included Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony, White House social secretary Desirée Rogers and White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel.

Over the past dozen years, boutique hotels such as the Hotel George, Hotel Monaco and Donovan House have gifted Washington with witty, modern design in the form of pulsating colors and sexy bathrooms. This hotel genre was hatched in New York in 1988 when hotelier IanSchrager and French designer Philippe Starck opened the Royalton Hotel with interiors that gave a new generation of hipsters a taste for luxury linensand exaggerated wing chairs. Their 1995 collaboration on the Delano in Miami's South Beach brought the all-white bedroom, oversize lampshades and lobby lounges into the vocabulary of American design.

Consumers charmed by hotel experiences in recent years have clamored for thick towels, high-thread-count sheets, plate-size shower heads and curved shower rods. The W Store (http://www.whotelsthestore.com) sells mattresses, linens and bathroom scales. On the Kimpton Style Web site (http://www.kimptonstyle.com), find the look local hotelgoers see at Kimpton properties such as Topaz Hotel, Hotel Helix and Morrison House, including crystal-ball table lamps and square red platters by Heath Ceramics.

The opening of the Hotel Washington in 1917 (rooms started at $1.50 a night) touted the luxurious amenity of a telephone in every bathroom. Today, guests in the W Hotel's top-of-the-line suite get fiber-optic cable wired to the National Press Club's satellite feed, allowing power players to conduct interviews without having to bring in satellite trucks.

"In the old days, if people said your work reminded them of a hotel, it meant it was lacking personality," says Washington interior designer Lori Graham. "But now if they say it looks like a boutique hotel, it means you're pushing the envelope."

Graham says these hotels give her clients a fresh perspective on space planning: "Hotels like the W show people that you can keep original plasterwork and traditional details but then add modern furnishings."

Clockwise from top left: Bronze vessel sinks accessorize the bathrooms. Five original chandeliers in the lobby were fitted with LEDs that change colors. A suite in the new W Hotel, formerly the Hotel Washington, features a grape-colored curved sofa and silvery shag carpet.