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THE GREAT INDOORS

# TECH TAKES OVER

*Retail's phygital future*

The focal point of the Commons Club at Virgin Hotels – designed by Rockwell Group Europe – is a two-storey bar.



# Like a Virgin

**RAUL LEAL OF VIRGIN HOTELS EXPLAINS WHY HE ENTRUSTED THE DESIGN OF THE COMPANY'S FIRST PROPERTY TO ROCKWELL GROUP EUROPE.**

WORDS *Shonquis Moreno*  
PORTRAIT *David Johnson*

'HE listened,' says Virgin Hotels CEO Raul Leal of architect Diego Gronda. 'When we first met, he listened carefully, which is the most important thing a designer can do – especially at the beginning.' Early this year, Gronda, creative director of Rockwell Group Europe, helped young-at-heart British megabrand Virgin enter the hotel-industry fray by designing its first property, which is located in Chicago.

Gronda and his team came up with a playful, innovative and modern hotel in a landmarked – the spa used to be a speakeasy – Art Deco building. The 250 guest rooms, called chambers, boast street-priced minibar items, unlimited free broadband and a fool's paradise of electrical outlets. Some rooms have dog beds. Guests check themselves in at computers and can use a smartphone app named Lucy to control temperature, television and lighting, or to order from room service and find nearby nightlife. At the time of printing, plans were well underway to have multiple round-the-clock entertainment venues available in the hotel itself.

Virgin entered the hotel arena convinced that it could craft a better hotel room without losing the excitement of lifestyle options, like those associated with W Hotels, while reaching the same level of consistency offered by branded hotels like Marriott. 'We wanted Rockwell to help

us put together a design that was as much form as style. We weren't just trying to decorate a hotel; we wanted it to flow better, work better,' says Leal, shaking his head at memories of poor lighting and terrible showers. 'We wanted to get those right, while having all the things you touch with your fingertips feel right, too. We didn't want to be confused with any other lifestyle brand, and we wanted to feel local. People thought we were just going to paint a building red and that would be the Virgin Hotel, but what we've achieved is a place with its own personality.'

Rockwell gave the corridors a residential feel, with sconces that recall streetlamps, and fashioned the chambers after a pied-à-terre, with an outer dressing room (hallway, closet and bathroom) that can be closed off from an inner bedroom, which Virgin calls the 'lounge'. Virgin had learned

that business travellers now spend more time working on their hotel beds than at desks, so Rockwell customized the bed with a sofa-like backrest in one corner that allows the user to work comfortably while facing someone else doing the same thing. 'Today the lines between work and play have blurred,' says Leal. 'We wanted to make the bed feel comfortable, not by throwing a lot of pillows on it, but by using ergonomics.'

Thanks to technology, Rockwell and Virgin worked seamlessly in spite of the time zone between Madrid and London and the two time zones between Chicago and the UK. Leal is pretty clear on how to be a good client: 'A good client is someone who provides as much direction as possible and is clear on expectations from the very beginning,' he says. 'It's a collaboration, and communication is the most important thing.' X

[virginhotels.com](http://virginhotels.com)



Raul Leal, CEO of Virgin Hotels, sits in the Commons Club of the company's first property, which is in Chicago.