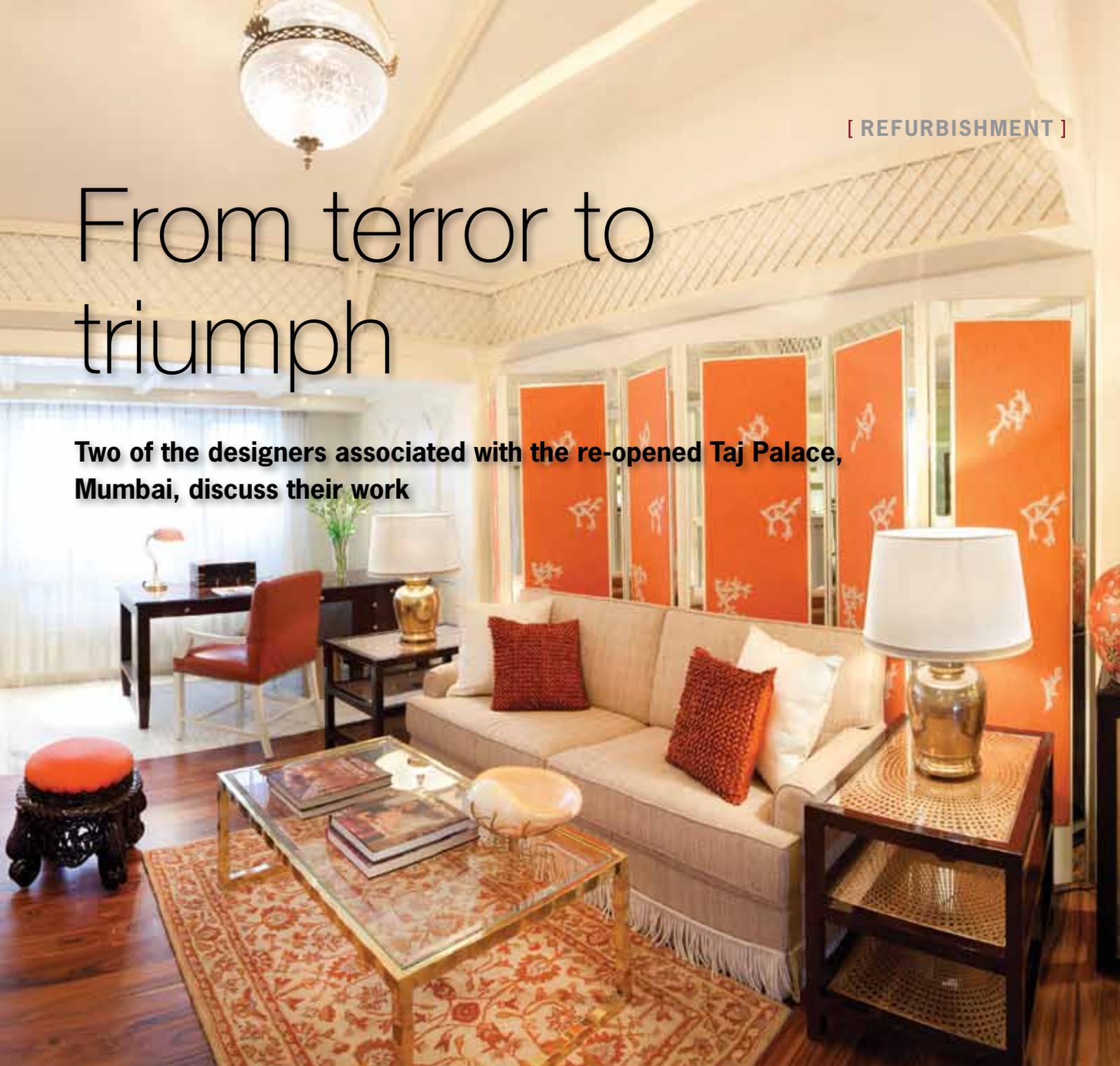


# From terror to triumph

Two of the designers associated with the re-opened Taj Palace, Mumbai, discuss their work



The landmark Taj Mahal Palace Hotel in Mumbai, India, was commissioned by Indian industrialist Jamsedji Tata. The hotel, a Grade 1 listed heritage building, combines eclectic influences in its building, Oriental, Florentine and Moorish, quite like the cosmopolitan character of Mumbai. The interiors showcase contemporary Indian influences along with beautiful vaulted alabaster ceilings, onyx columns, hand-woven silk carpets, Belgian crystal chandeliers, a magnificent art collection built over 100 years and an eclectic collection of furniture. The hotel was one of several Mumbai landmarks

attacked by terrorists in November 2008. The 107-year old building suffered extensive damage from a 60-hour siege that killed 166 people. An international consortium of designers that included Lissoni Associati, BAMO, DesignWilkes, Rockwell Group Europe and James Park Associates spent more than 21 months and \$38 million in a restoration effort that has brought the hotel back to its former glory, perhaps even more magnificent than before. The refurbishment effort also restored the art works that were damaged in the attacks.

Kuala Lumpur-based interior designer Jeffrey

By Design Wilkes: The refurbished Coral Suite



[ REFURBISHMENT ]

**Project details**

- Location:** Mumbai, India
- Originally opened:** December 1903
- Refurbishment started:** November 2008
- Completed:** August, 2010
- Estimated cost:** \$37.3 million
- Owner and operator:** Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces, Tata Group
- Consultants:** Jeffrey Wilkes, Rockwell Group, Lissoni Associati and James Park Associates (JPA)





Wilkes worked on a major renovation of the property seven years ago, and refurbished a number of suites, the typical rooms, public areas, Masala Kraft, Crystal Room, Golden Dragon, Sea Lounge, the Ballroom, Harbour Bar, and Wasabi.

“So when 26/11 hit, of course we were hit too,” he recalls. “I happened to be in Mumbai that day, but luckily was at the The Leela near the airport. I sat there and watched the chaos unfold with tears in my eyes. Two weeks later I went to the site, we offered our services in whatever way possible. We sent off drawings. We immediately redid a colour scheme for the Sea Lounge with our fee being donated to the Taj Trust.”

After the shock, Taj then decided to take a slightly different approach to reinvent the property. “We were hired to freshen up the Golden Dragon, as well as four suites. The Dolphin Suite which had never been done before, as well as two new suites destroyed by fire, the newly relocated Bella Vista Suite, The Maratha Suite and the Aquarius Suite. During our presentations we were given the chance

to make a pitch for the Tata Suite,” says Wilkes.

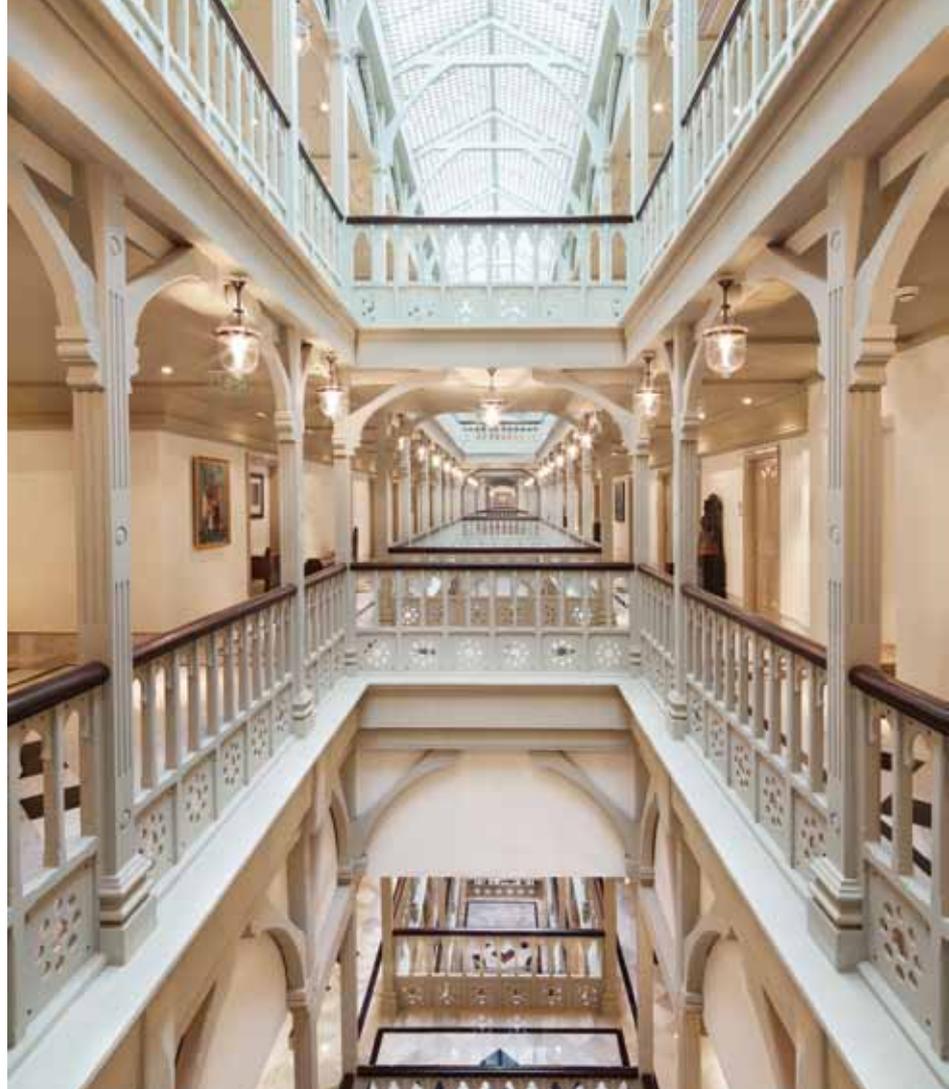
“The brief was simple. We were given an open hand really. We wanted to reflect the name of the suite somehow, but basically wanted to create lovely rooms that fit within the palace context. We also wanted them to be “happy” if they could, especially after the tragedy.”

Having worked in India for years on a number of five-star properties, Wilkes and his team are very familiar with what can be accomplished in terms of craft. Each of the bathrooms has beautiful inlay marble detailing. Wilkes has used silver and gold leafing details, Indian fabrics throughout, handtufted carpets, and custom furniture.

“We have even dug around the basement to pull out a few treasures! We found an amazing brass lamp that we used in the Bella Vista Suite found down in the cellar. The entrance to the Tata Suite is all carved white Makrana marble [from the northwestern Indian state of Rajasthan] and the floors throughout the main areas are also in

**Better than before:**  
Golden Dragon restaurant  
(above), the Grand  
Luxury Room (left) and  
Palace Lounge  
(facing page)





**Refurbished:** Seagull Lounge (above), Palace Corridor (right) and the ballroom (top)

white Makrana, all beautifully selected and almost a crime to cover with carpet. We have carved furniture, silver leafed headboards, jalis, mother-of-pearl inlay and silver-clad chairs.”

Madrid-based architecture and design firm, Rockwell Group Europe, completed the redesign of two popular restaurants: Chef Morimoto’s Wasabi restaurant and the historic Harbour Bar. The Harbour Bar’s rich history served as a point of departure for Rockwell Group Europe’s design inspiration, with echoes of its Art Deco legacy seen in the furniture and finishes. Since receiving the first liquor license in India, the Harbour Bar has played host to decades of high-powered meetings and gatherings. Its historical prestige is manifested in the centre bar, a solid carved piece of white marble that denotes the potency of a bygone era but boasts a fresh new face for Mumbai’s new generation of movers and shakers. The back bar is framed in cut glass and provides an inviting light, warmth and glow.

The renovation also uncovered two historic windows overlooking the harbour, where Rockwell Group Europe installed a new raised seating area to juxtapose the vivacity of Apollo Bunder Road outside with the intimacy of a classic bar setting.

Art continues to be a distinctive and significant feature of the space, with oversized carved wood pieces at the entrance that define the room with elegant appliqué elements.

Just upstairs from the Harbour Bar is Chef Morimoto’s Wasabi Restaurant, where guests are transported into a ‘magic box’ of red lacquer that wraps all the way from the top of the staircase through the restaurant. Traditional Japanese motifs pervade the space, such as an installation of drifting cherry blossoms behind the host stand, and crafted joinery on the restaurant walls. The focal points of activity are the freestanding sushi counter and teppanyaki kitchen defined by a large art piece by Indian artist Sadanand Shirke. The exquisite private dining room for which Wasabi is renowned now centres on a sculptural round table lit by an overscale custom fixture of hammered metal.

What is notable in the works by both design firms is that Indian art, crafts and indigenous techniques have been used extensively. Wilkes says there is a wealth of craft alive and well in India and they always try to use it in all their projects, be they contemporary or traditional.

## Change agents: Rockwell Group Europe

DIEGO GRONDA, managing and creative director, Rockwell Group Europe, discusses his design of the iconic Harbour Bar and Wasabi by Morimoto, with SHALAKA PARADKAR

**What was the design brief given to your firm? What was the extent and scope of your involvement in this project?**

Rockwell Group Europe was asked to restore the Harbour Bar and Wasabi by Morimoto spaces to their original glory and splendour. To that end, we decided to completely renovate the spaces and reinterpret the design and theme to reflect the Taj's tradition of providing outstanding culinary experiences.

Harbour Bar was particularly challenging to design due to the fact that it has a long and well-established history. It was the first restaurant or bar in India to receive a liquor license. For over 80 years, Harbour Bar has been the power room of Mumbai; most business deals in the city have been finalised there. Many generations of Mumbai residents and visitors have very different and strong memories of the bar.

Part of our strategy to find innovative design that would address the various expectations of the Harbour Bar's guests was to research the bar's different iterations from when it first opened in 1933 and celebrate the many design components that made its reputation.

We also had a more pragmatic challenge. Prior to 26/11, Harbour Bar and Wasabi were connected by a steep spiral staircase, which was destroyed by the attacks. The client required a more comfortable staircase and a large elevator. In addition, Harbour Bar is a small and intimate space, so finding an appropriate design solution that incorporated these elements without compromising the intimacy of the space was an enormous challenge.

**As this is a Grade 1 listed heritage building, what were some of the areas of concern for the interior design?**

The Heritage building designation only affected the parts of our design plan that involved the building's façade. For example, special care had to be taken

after we decided to restore an original window that had been covered in a past renovation.

**How did you tackle this project, given its traumatic and emotional context? What did you base your design approach on?**

The client made it clear that Taj wanted to look to the future. Particular care was taken to express the



**Wasabi:** The private dining room



[ REFURBISHMENT ]



**Indi-genius:** Art by emerging Indian artists and Indian crafts are deployed extensively in the restaurants, says Gronda (above)

project as the evolution of the two spaces, rather than a refurbishment or rebuild. The 26/11 attacks influenced the project in terms of timing. The client wanted Harbour Bar and Wasabi to have a rebirth in exactly one year after the attacks. I'm very pleased to say that we were able to help accomplish this dream. The level of involvement and professionalism of the Taj team helped considerably to accomplish this goal.

The condition of the Harbour Bar and Wasabi by Morimoto spaces was a significant challenge. Harbour Bar was severely damaged as a result of 26/11, so there was nothing left in that space but rubble. Moreover, our client was determined to rebuild Harbour Bar and Wasabi within one year, so we were confronted with an unusually tight time frame.

It was difficult on a personal level because we were working on the sites of such tragedy. So many of the people we were working with in Mumbai were still in the throes of their healing process. We really admired the courage and strength of our colleagues and their enthusiasm for the renovation project.

**What were some of your significant design interventions?**

We made major design interventions in both Harbour Bar and Wasabi by Morimoto. With the growth of the city and the increasing traffic on Apollo Bunder road outside, the Harbour Bar's view had been impeded by pedestrians and cars parked outside.

One of the most important changes that we made was raising the bar's lounge area up two steps, creating a platform from which guests can now have a real view to the harbor. We also incorporated new windows into Harbour Bar. After doing research on the original façade of the hotel, we found that the lower ground space that the bar occupies had series of windows, which were then blocked. We decided to reinstate these windows, allowing natural light into the bar and lounge. The bar location remained the same, but the entrance to the kitchen and the wine cellar behind bar is brand new.

In addition, there is a high level of craftsmanship in the restaurant's design elements that is the result of extensive research of traditional Japanese crafts. For example, we researched wood joinery, which is reflected in the wood paneling between the "butterfly" locking systems. The wicker chairs were inspired by 19th century Japanese furniture. Also, the use of highly polished metals cladding the existing



### Firm profile

Rockwell Group Europe builds upon the energy and eclecticism of the Rockwell Group's main office in New York (founded more than 25 years ago by David Rockwell), and Diego Gronda's extensive work in all five continents. Rockwell Group Europe focuses on designing hotels, restaurants, retail centres and spas. Current work includes a W Retreat & Spa in Vieques, Puerto Rico, W Paris-Opéra in France, a restaurant in the Four Seasons Hotel in Baku, Azerbaijan, and a Le Méridien hotel in Oran, Algeria.

arches added additional airiness to the space.

We also made significant changes to the arrival and entrance layout for both spaces. Originally, the access to Harbour Bar was simple and narrow. We defined a much bolder sense of arrival from the hotel lobby by increasing the size of the opening and foyer. Guests used to access Wasabi through a spiral staircase in Harbour Bar. We felt that the staircase was understated, and that the sense of arrival and transition to Wasabi should be more dramatic and celebratory. To replace the spiral staircase, we installed a feature staircase – an “unfolding origami red carpet” – which unfolds from Harbour Bar all the way up to Wasabi. Since the traffic on the original staircase was very distracting in the original Harbour Bar space, we paid particular attention to screening the stair and elevator so not to cause any interference in the bar.

#### Now that the hotel has reopened, which aspects are you particularly proud about?

For Wasabi, the private dining room was always considered the jewel space of the restaurant. We created a more intimate environment by installing a sculptural round table lit by an overscale custom lighting fixture made from hammered metal. We

also re-imagined the restaurant as a “magic box” of red lacquer that wraps all the way from the staircase to the entrance of the restaurant.

All patterns and motifs were selected from existing ones in the Heritage building.

Both spaces feature a significant amount of art. Most of the art was selected from the hotel's extensive Heritage collection. Harbour Bar has a well balanced combination of art works by Indian masters such as Ganesh Haldi, Ram Kumar, Laxman Pai and G.R. Santhosh. In addition, we commissioned two up-and-coming Indian artists to create large-scale pieces for Harbour Bar and Wasabi.

In Wasabi, Mumbai artist Sadanand reinterpreted the city's profile in an abstract and powerful art piece. For the raised platform at Harbour Bar we selected acclaimed new artist Rajesh Pullarwar to create a modern and elegant piece that anchors the room. The combination of works from the 1950s and 1960s with works by emerging artists provides guest with an alternative reading of contemporary art evolution in the past century.

Finally, the entire project was built and manufactured in India. We used local materials and employed craftspeople from many different regions of India ranging from Rajasthan to Tamil Nadu.

**Classical:** The new Harbour Bar