

# Hospitality Interiors

INTERIOR DESIGN FOR HOTELS, RESTAURANTS, BARS & CLUBS

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Illustrate by Solus Ceramics



## A bright year ahead

2015 has seen a promising start for the hospitality industry, with the increase in occupancy rates and RevPAR experienced in 2014 set to continue into the new year. This – combined with reports of a strong recovery in the Provinces and continued growth in London – paints an encouraging picture for the year to come and, crucially for the design world, provides a solid platform for the innovative new hospitality brands and upcoming launches entering the fold.

One such highly anticipated opening is that of Virgin Hotels Chicago, the first property from Virgin Group founder, Richard Branson. With phase one of the project now complete, and phase two set to complete in mid-April, we spoke with Diego Gronda, managing and creative director of the firm behind the hotel's spectacular design, Rockwell Group Europe – see page 30. The innovative and playful spirit for which the Virgin brand is known emanates throughout the interior – from 'The Funny Library' with its curated collection of comedic books and vintage art, to the townhouse-inspired guest room doors in Virgin's signature red.

Also featuring quirky and vibrant interior design, Backstay Hostel Ghent (page 36) is another stand-out project from recent months. Designers Nele Van Damme and Yannick Baeyens have transformed this Art Deco structure – formerly the pressroom of a socialist newspaper – into a multi-faceted hostel that meets the every whim of travellers, even down to a blogging room in the tower ...

It seems that now, more than ever, there is a sense of freedom and experimentation emanating from the hospitality design world, from the downright wacky, to inventive narrative themes or artful layouts. Equally innovative product lines are supporting these creative spaces – The Alchemist Collection of bold interior vintage lighting featured on page 24 a perfect example of what can be achieved through challenging conventional material applications.

Besides the fit-to-burst projects section this issue, find inspiration in our guest room, surfacing and furniture features, which showcase the likes of Justin van Breda, Flou, Fameed Khaliq and Formica. Enjoy!



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Virgin Hotels, the lifestyle hotel brand by Virgin Group founder Sir Richard Branson, looked to the multiple award-winning design firm, Rockwell Group Europe on its first property, Virgin Hotels Chicago.

## Virgin Hotels Chicago, USA

Rockwell Group Europe and Virgin Hotels have completed phase one of the design; 250 guest rooms, known as Chambers, including 38 one-bedroom suites and The Commons Club, the social hub of the hotel.

Phase two, set to complete by mid-April, will include Miss Ricky's, a street-level diner; Two Zero Three, an old-fashioned coffee and wine bar; two penthouse suites and The Spa, featuring a rustic design.

"Bringing to life the Virgin Hotel brand has been a fluid, collaborative process," says Raul Leal, CEO of Virgin Hotels. "While we came to the project with a specific notion of hospitality that builds on Virgin's innovative and playful spirit, Rockwell Group Europe helped us design a unique guest experience focused on customisation and efficiency."

"Design is critical," Branson has commented about the hotel's many clever features. "There's just a feeling you get when you walk into a Virgin property. Design is what sets it apart."

Virgin Hotels Chicago is located in downtown Chicago in the Old Dearborn Bank building, a 26-storey Art Deco landmark. Several of the building's original features have been restored and are showcased throughout, like a 1920s oak Cigar Bar that serves as the hotel's front desk and ornate brass elevator doors.

"The Old Dearborn Bank building adds a lot of historic Chicago character to the hotel and allowed us to work with wonderful original details while bringing in contemporary design elements to underscore Virgin Hotels' vibrant identity," comments Diego Gronda, managing and creative director, Rockwell Group Europe.

At the heart of Virgin Hotels Chicago is the 11,000ft<sup>2</sup> Commons Club, a dynamic gathering place that is divided into four zones: The Commons Bar, The Shag Room, The Funny Library and The Kitchen. As guests depart the elevators, they are greeted by a 'You are Welcome' metal sign, setting a cheeky tone for their visit.



Diego Gronda

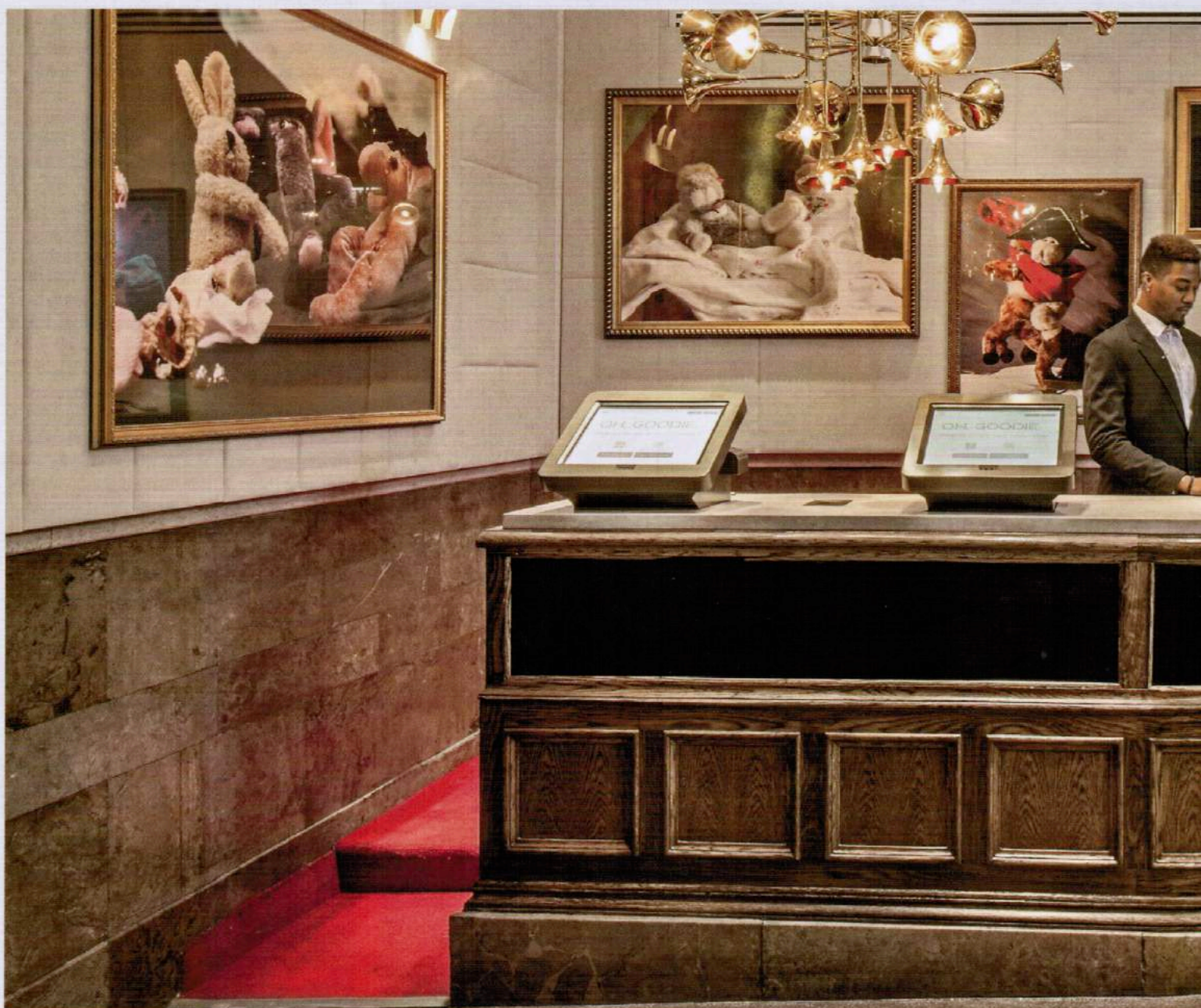


Tremendous effort went into restoring the historic double-height, coffered plaster ceiling of The Commons Club, which is accentuated by exposed filament pendant lights that drop down above The Commons Bar. Adjacent to the bar is The Shag Room, where small parties can convene on large couches in a semi-private or private setting.

The Funny Library serves as a remote office with a sense of humour, offering a curated collection of comedic books as well as vintage toys and art from local antique stores. The Kitchen serves breakfast, lunch and dinner from an open-air kitchen to guests seated at the bar, communal tables and cosy booths.

The interconnecting zones will be programmed weekly with talks on innovation and entrepreneurship, musical entertainment and much more, setting the vibe of a private members club, but open for all and without the fees.

The guest room corridors set a residential mood with red wall lamps, reminiscent of street lighting, and townhouse-inspired guest room doors in Virgin's signature red. The design of the







guest rooms is timeless yet playful, with a simple palette of natural woods for furniture and finishes. Each Chamber is styled after a 'pied a terre' with two distinct areas:

The Dressing Room combines hallway, closet and bathroom into one luxurious space. It includes an over-sized vanity with great lighting; a separate iconic make up desk with seating, storage and a mirror; two Poliform closets with ample shelving, drawers and hanging storage plus a separate water closet and large shower with a bench.

Passing through The Dressing Room, guests enter The Lounge, featuring a patent pending bed that functions as a playpen and traditional bed. The Lounge Bed, co-created by the Virgin Hotels design team and Rockwell Group Europe, is engineered and functionally optimised for comfort. It boasts a soft padded ergonomic headboard and an added corner seat at the foot, allowing for comfortable, multi-dimensional lounging.

A generous and comfortable work desk or dining area is equipped with a custom designed rotating table, a Poltrona Frau desk chair, and an Artemide LED task light. Adding a pop of red to the room's colour palette is a miniature SMEG fridge.

Dividing The Dressing Room from The Lounge are sliding privacy doors that give travelling companions individual areas, while also closing off the room to hallway noise.

Diego Gronda, managing and creative director, Rockwell Group Europe, explains the rationale behind the defined spaces on the standard guestrooms.

"Virgin Hotels asked us to design a guest experience that would focus on customisation and efficiency – the division of the standard guest rooms into two spaces grew out of that concept. The layout increases flexibility and privacy for travelling companions. For example, if one person wants to sleep in, the other can close the wooden sliding doors that separate the Sleeping Lounge from the Dressing Room to shower and get dressed.



"The Dressing Room also serves as a buffer between the Sleeping Lounge and the hallway, minimising the impact of hallway noise."

Throughout the hotel, the Virgin brand DNA is subtle but clear and unmistakable: creativity and playfulness have been cleverly worked into Rockwell's design.

"Virgin Hotels didn't provide us with a detailed brief asking for a certain design aesthetic or style, but they had a clear sense of how they wanted this new brand to be experienced, which influenced some of the design choices," explains Diego.

"The aesthetic was never to be overpowering. It was important to integrate smart design features and create a fun and relaxed vibe. You'll notice that the design of the guestrooms is quite simple and timeless.

"We relied mostly on a palette of natural woods for the furniture and finishes, with a touch of playfulness. There is a sense of whimsy to the furniture and an emphasis on versatility and comfort. One of my favorite pieces is the patent-pending Lounge Bed that we custom designed in collaboration with Virgin Hotels' in-house design team.

"They challenged us to completely rethink the concept of a bed and its uses as a place where people not only sleep but also work on their laptops, read a book, or simply relax. Among the hotel's public spaces, the Commons Club is unusual because of the flow of spaces and activity.

"Guests can settle into the library as their temporary office, meet in the lounge areas, or enjoy a casual meal from the open kitchen. We carefully evaluated the flow from one space to the next to allow for a dynamic spatial experience and encourage a vibrant atmosphere."

The impressive old bank building has been transformed into a great, modern hotel by Rockwell. But did the existing fabric help or hinder the process?

"Virgin Hotel Chicago is located in the Old Dearborn Bank Building, an impressive 1920s Art Deco landmark originally designed as an office building by Rapp and Rapp, two Chicago architects," points out Diego.

"Given the historic nature of the building, there were some limitations to what we could do to the structure, but there was also this great opportunity to work within a truly special architectural context and to bring a gem back to splendor.

"Our design celebrates many of the building's original details while contemporary design elements underscore Virgin's vibrant identity. A number of original features were meticulously restored, including the iconic 1920s oak Cigar Bar that serves as the hotel's front desk, the marble floor in the lobby, ornate brass elevator doors, and the intricately ornamented, double-height plaster ceiling in the hotel's Commons Club.

"There's a dynamic dialogue between the old and the new. It took some imagination to reinvent the building as a hotel, as there were rooms of many different shapes and sizes. We had to create a consistent design and layout to make it work.

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