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Canopy by Hilton

LONDON CITY

Hilton's lifestyle brand lands in London, with designers Acme looking to the surrounding neighbourhood to craft the interiors.

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Photography: © John Athimaritis

When Hilton Worldwide announced its entry into the lifestyle segment with the launch of Canopy back in 2014, London came high on the wish-list of cities in which to plant its flag. Described as locally-inspired with one-of-a-kind design features, the brand positions each property as a natural extension of its neighbourhood. But, like all hotels that are defined by their surroundings, location was key, and in a city as diverse as London, the right spot wasn't so easy to come by. So when it transpired that 4C Hotel Group were developing a site in East London – in close proximity to the eclectic neighbourhoods of Shoreditch, the city, Spitalfields and Whitechapel – it was deemed the ideal opportunity for Canopy's London debut.

The Minories masterplan, which includes office and residential components as well as a landscaped park and smaller urban squares, required the adaptive re-use of an existing building, a move that supports both 4C and Hilton's sustainability goals, however the 1980s

office block wasn't particularly in line with the brand, so an innovative solution was required to create a more pleasing aesthetic. "We had many discussions with 4C about the design of the hotel and they wanted a firm who could transform the look and feel of the entire building, not only the interiors," explains Christopher Webb, Vice President of Architecture & Design EMEA at Hilton. "This hotel is about being brave, doing something new, exciting and unexpected, so they came up with Acme."

The multi-disciplinary studio founded by Friedrich Ludewig is behind a number of landmark developments, from shopping malls, educational facilities and cultural institutions to entire district masterplans, but at the time, they had never before designed a hotel. Acme's appointment as both architect and interior designer could be seen by some as a risk, but for Webb, it was an opportunity. "If someone has designed 300 hotels, they know the formula," he explains. "By using a firm that is relatively new to the sector, different ideas come up. We



Public spaces feature artwork curated by Muzeo and Dais, while Elegant Clutter collaborated with the Hilton team to source an extensive collection of styling pieces

knew that Acme were really creative in other fields so they just applied their expertise to a hotel.”

The team may have required additional guidance through the planning stages of the hotel’s design, but it seems the risk has paid off. The façade in particular is standout, a style that Hilton might not have had the confidence to take on if it wasn’t for Acme’s track record. “It would have been really easy to do something constrained and expected, but Acme are well-known for their façades,” points out Webb. “Their idea was to clad the entire building to make it a glistening beacon in East London – it’s completely transformed it.”

It is indeed a transformation. The former office block still stands to house the majority of the hotel, though its nondescript exterior is now cloaked in a handsome bronze façade that extends to an adjacent building and newbuild portion, harmoniously joining the structures to appear as one. The new skin is made up of 1,900 aluminium fins, based on just three modules that are rotated and repeated to create a three-dimensional pattern that rises rhythmically to the upper floors to dramatic effect.

For the interiors, Acme were tasked with developing a scheme that reflects the rich history and culture of the surroundings, aligning with Canopy’s brand identity of being an extension of its neighbourhood. From their nearby studio, the team – led by Ludewig together with project lead Eleni Meladaki – set out in search of the tales and traditions that characterise the area. “Neighbourhood and partnerships are key to Canopy,” explains Webb. “Acme’s studio is based in Shoreditch so it couldn’t be better placed. They spent a lot of time researching and created an amazing narrative; there’s a different story to every space.”

Acme’s research unearthed countless stories from across the surrounding neighbourhoods, some dating back to the 15th and 16th centuries, others relating to the present day. There’s the silk weaving skills of the Huguenots, who settled in East London having fled religious persecution in their native France; and nearby Butcher’s Row and Blood Alley, where livestock would be herded and held in pens as

they awaited slaughter; as well as contemporary influences from the likes of Brick Lane, Whitechapel Art Gallery and Spitalfields Market.

“The challenge was to find interesting ways to take those stories and turn them into something contemporary for a hotel setting,” explains Ludewig, who spent weeks delving into the archives in search of inspiration. “Some references are subtle, while others are more fun,” he continues, adding that although a selection of finishes carry through multiple spaces, “there’s enough difference in materiality for each to have its own identity”.

On arrival, check-in is a low-key affair with the Canopy brand favouring an inviting welcome table rather than the typical unwieldy counter. Here, it takes the form of a haberdashery cabinet in homage to the East End’s historic textile industry, with open shelves displaying a selection of retail items as well as curios sourced in collaboration with Elegant Clutter. The wider lobby, known as Canopy Central, is an open-plan space comprising a lounge and café, which, in line with the brand aesthetic, naturally flow into one another and feature plenty of natural daylight. Where it does differ from other properties in the Canopy portfolio is in the design; once again, interiors take cues from the history of the surrounding neighbourhood. The inset carpet at check-in for example is inspired by a floral pattern handwoven by the Huguenots, while Freedom Café – which also serves as a local hang-out – takes its identity from the Freedom Press, an anarchist publishing house and bookseller on Whitechapel High Street. Materials and finishes, both in the café and throughout the hotel, follow a ‘raw meets refined’ approach in which exposed concrete and textured plaster sit alongside glossy walnut and polished brass.

Though the lobby is open-plan, Acme have used a selection of furniture to effectively create zones that are equally suited to work and socialising; a curving sofa upholstered in emerald velvet defines the outer perimeter, while clusters of armchairs occupy the central lounge, accompanied by leather sofas, communal tables and bar seating. There’s



For the brand's signature over-bed canopy, Acme created a pleated headboard that rises and curves over the bed, mirroring the aluminium fins on the façade

also pockets of quiet where guests can hide away from the activity of the public spaces. Up on the mezzanine, a row of two-seater tables provide a spot to work, while, partitioned from the lobby by a double-sided bookcase, The Retreat is a cosy lounge. According to Ludewig, the design concept here takes inspiration from the Young British Artists, a group of creatives from the 1980s including the likes of Damien Hirst, Rachel Whiteread and Angus Fairhurst. A romantic interpretation of taxidermy and tattoo art pairs with honest materials such as wool, linen, brass and walnut, complemented by the warmth of an open fire.

Rounding out the public spaces, the hotel's main restaurant weaves in – quite literally – further influences from the textile industry. Named Penny Squares after the pieces of fabric that were used to teach girls how to sew through the 1800s, the 120-cover dining room primarily speaks of working with yarn. Occupying one wall, sheer drapes embroidered with historic motifs, scenery and patterns in a bold red yarn

represent the penny squares that were once stitched together to form a quilt. Look close enough, and there's some playful references to the hotel and its designers too. Embroidery also covers the backs of the banquettes, adding a softness to the otherwise industrial palette of weathered copper, antique bronze and powder-coated metal cladding.

In credit to Acme, every space has been given the same level of care and attention, with the interiors telling enough stories to fill a book. The ground-floor lift lobby draws inspiration from the former Church of Holy Trinity; built on the same site as an abbey occupied by the Minoresses – the nuns from which Minorities takes its name; Acme's interpretation sees a chamber-like space clad floor-to-ceiling in tactile velvet, with an ecclesiastical light installation hanging overhead. Even the lengthy corridors upstairs have added interest thanks to painted portraits of the diverse mix of locals observed at Spitalfields Market.

Local details too can be found in the 340



guestrooms and suites, a rare find for such a large key count. “We asked ourselves how we could design interiors that talk to the building and their surroundings,” says Ludewig, adding that he wanted to create something special for the brand’s signature over-bed canopy. “Rather than a generic feature, we made a canopy that feels like it’s for this particular hotel,” he continues, pointing out the pleated timber headboard that curves over the bed, mirroring the aluminium fins just outside the window.

Guestrooms come in many forms owing to the adaptive re-use of the building, with interiors bringing together a variety of influences seen throughout the hotel: exposed concrete ceilings feed into the raw-meets-refined aesthetic; a faded-effect floral wallpaper and abstract rug reference the textile patterns of the Huguenots; a fur throw speaks of Butcher’s Row; and a shelving unit framing the television is dressed with curios such as old metal letters that relate to the printing press. “They don’t come from nowhere, everything has a relationship,”

confirms Ludewig. Being more accustomed to residential projects where only small quantities of furniture are specified, Acme particularly enjoyed the scale of the project and being able to design everything bespoke – including the open wardrobe that neatly combines storage space and mini-bar amenities. Ludewig also commends the creative freedom given by 4C and Hilton. “When we were appointed, there was only Canopy Reykjavik open, so the brand book was just a few pages,” he quips. “We knew we could have fun with it.”

For Hilton, the success has been in the narrative that Acme has brought to the scheme, through their research and connections to local artists and makers, whose works and craftsmanship can be seen in every space. “We’re blessed with the most amazing stories from this corner of East London,” concludes Webb. “Just by looking to the surrounding neighbourhood, Acme have been able to draw so much inspiration and find creative ways to showcase it in the hotel; that’s what Canopy is about.”



EXPRESS CHECK-OUT

Owner / Developer: 4C Hotel Group

Operator: Hilton Worldwide

Architecture and Interior Design: Acme

Lighting Design: Nulty

Art Consultants: Dais, Muzeo

F&B Branding: Gorgeous Group

Procurement: Blue Moon

Landscaping: Gillespies, Spacehub

Main Contractors: Radford Group, X Construct

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