

Fantasy Fac



Spot the difference: the Loews Portofino Bay Hotel in Florida (left) and Portofino village on the Ligurian coast, Italy.

Entertainment architecture is a popular way for resort hotels to create that extra wow factor by creating fantasy themes or replicas of historic destinations. **Christian Sylt** and **Caroline Reid** report on the latest developments around the world.

A series of continental-style multi-coloured road-signs direct guests to a harbour lined with scooters, olive trees and cafés. Souvenir shops housed in fishing huts and cream-coloured apartments with cracked plaster walls surround the water's edge. Then a string quartet starts a serenade from a balcony. It wouldn't seem out of place for a movie director to leap out calling 'cut' because this full-scale mock-up of the Italian resort of Portofino is in fact in Orlando Universal Resort, Florida, and what seem to be apartments are actually rooms in the Loews Portofino Bay hotel.

The economic downturn put the brakes on extended vacations in the US. In 2009, visitors to Universal Orlando Resort, for example, dropped by 10% to 5.5m. Luring leisure

travellers remains difficult so resorts are looking at ways to stand out from the crowd. Service standards and furnishings are just two elements on which resorts compete but they are increasingly going one step further and using the buildings themselves to create that superlative wow factor.

The Chinese gambling mecca on the islands of Macau has embraced entertainment architecture with open arms. The Venetian is a US\$2.4bn hotel and casino complete with replicas of Venice's famous landmarks such as the Doge's Palace and the Campanile. Gondolas take guests around the resort under an imitation sky that changes colour from one area to the next. The Venetian Macau is owned by US-based Las Vegas Sands Corporation through its majority-owned

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subsidiary Sands China. Quite apart from being originally inspired by Italy, the Venetian Macau (opened 2007) is pretty much a carbon copy of the same resort hotel in Las Vegas (opened 1999). The fact that Macau reportedly generated four times more revenue than Las Vegas last year underlines the eastward shift that the global economy is currently experiencing.

The new owners of the Dubai Palladium, a 5,000-capacity seminar and concert venue that ran into financial difficulties, are converting it into a replica of a north European street scene, complete with 30 bars and restaurants, open terraces, a central marketplace, a boutique hotel and two nightclubs. Visitors will be able to imagine they are in a city such as Prague as they hop from venue to venue. To ensure authenticity, the covered facility will include artificial rain and thunderstorms. Investment is coming from Lebanon among other international sources.

However, Orlando is the destination which introduced the world to entertainment architecture through its fanciful theme

parks. Loews Portofino Bay hotel opened in 1999 and the idea for the hotel came from someone who knows a thing or two about mass market appeal: movie producer Steven Spielberg was a consultant at the park. One of Spielberg's favourite hotels is the historic Splendido in Italy's Portofino but he went one step further than suggesting a recreation of it. His proposal was for a mock-up of the entire village.

The task was given to the design architects, Wimberly Allison Tong & Goo (WATG), a renowned firm also behind the design of Atlantis, Dubai; Caesars Palace, Las Vegas; and the Palace of the Lost City in South Africa's Sun City as well as numerous Mandarin Oriental, Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons and Fairmont properties worldwide.

"In some cases we have been asked to develop the brief from scratch with little more than a room count. The briefs may or may not include design direction, in which case we have been asked to initiate the vision," says Michael Chun, WATG's Senior Vice President. The source material used by the company can be very diverse.





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“With properties like Caesars Palace in Las Vegas there was already an existing Roman vocabulary to draw from,” says WATG’s Associate Vice President, Thomas Fo, adding that: “When we designed the Venetian hotel in Las Vegas we spent a week in Venice with the owner and his staff, walking the streets and the piazzas, sketching, and taking lots of photographs and video. We talked to not only the locals of Venice but the tourists. We were looking for what made Venice special and different from other cities, what people liked and where they gathered, ate and relaxed. There was no substitute for what we learned in that week.”

The design process follows key criteria and has clear stages. “The first thing we like to do is establish the main storyline,” says Fo. “It is something that you can always go back to, to see if your design is visually making sense. We do a lot of research on whatever theme we are doing. We gather a lot of images from books, videos and articles and if possible visit buildings of the same theme. As we start to develop the design we do a number of design sketches to see how the theme and the massing of the building can integrate into the program of the hotel. The length of concept and schematic design phase vary. It could be as short as a couple of months or an evolving creative design process that could be six to eight months depending on the size of the project and the complexity of the theme.”

Chun explains that WATG also produces an art package for all themed hotels it works on. “This art package is the further conceptualization of the themed details. With Atlantis in Dubai, the sea life, shells, fish, animals, and other fictional elements, transcend reality into fantasy. Not all Atlantis’s themed elements are ‘of this earth’ which adds an additional element of surprise and delight for the guest.” This is the ultimate aim for all themed hotels.

“There is a sense of anticipation that the guests experience regardless of the reason they are visiting the hotel,” says Paul Leclerc, General Manager of the Loews Portofino Bay Hotel, Florida.

“When guests read the advance literature and view photos of the hotel, they receive a clear indication of the design integrity and the expectation begins to build that the hotel is something truly special and unique. When the guest arrives and is immersed in an exceptional service environment that is coupled with an overwhelming commitment to delivering the culture of the storyline, it can be a truly magical experience.”

Loews’ three hotels at Universal Studios (Loews Royal Pacific Resort, Hard Rock Hotel and the Portofino) aren’t just themed but based on architectural styles from around the world so they have to stand up to comparison with the real thing. The hotels can take the most renowned features from the original destinations whilst leaving out any elements, such

as litter, which aren't so appealing. Accordingly, the Loews Portofino Bay hotel is even more ornate than the Italian fishing village on which it is based.

From the moment guests drive down the winding cypress tree-lined road to the hotel they are immersed in an experience that tries to convince them they are in Italy. Old Italian posters adorn the exposed brickwork in the lobby, Vivaldi is pumped in through hidden speakers and padded tapestries line the inside of the elevators. Corridors are even mocked up as city streets with faux star-scenes on the tall ceilings and porcelain plaques showing the room numbers.

From the outside, the Loews Portofino Bay hotel even seems to have more balconies and balustrades than it has actually got: another mark of its authenticity. Trompe l'oeil involves painting windows and balconies onto blank walls to give the impression that they are real and is commonly used on buildings throughout Liguria, the Italian home of the original Portofino.

Still, there's nothing make-believe about Loews Portofino Bay's facilities which include a full-service spa, six restaurants and three pools with one styled as a ruined Roman aqueduct. The Italian theme pervades throughout the hotel's 750 rooms and suites as the beds have huge padded mattresses and sculptured wooden headboards.

Italian paintings hang on the walls and only the plastic

phone and bedside alarm look out of place. The attention to detail is infectious and you find yourself reaching to tap antiques to check if they are genuine. They are.

Leclerc says: "There are Italian antiques and period Italian automobiles throughout our grounds, as well as Vespas, wooden carts and fishing boats. All doors throughout the hotel was designed to match the Italian hardware and some, in fact, are sourced directly from Italy. Decorative light fixtures were also designed to match the Italian lighting and some were sourced directly from Italy."

All the furnishings have to fit into the theme and Leclerc indicates that this can be a challenge when it comes to maintenance. "Everything you do must remain true to the original storyline in terms of renovations, refurbishments, purchasing, food and beverage messaging, new equipment, and landscaping," he says, adding: "In addition to executing the exceptional service expectations of the hotel, you must weave the storyline into team member training so that they are not only leaving the guest with the expected service execution, but also a resonating cultural impression that they were transported into the storyline."

As Leclerc claims: "Loews Portofino Bay hotel is the only place in central Florida where you can experience the sounds, sights and tastes of Italy without travelling halfway around the world." ●

Though known for designing successful themed resorts, architect firm WATG's current portfolio of work is varied and contextual.



Top: Hotel Monte Mulini, Croatia. A modern and sophisticated five-star hotel in the historic coastal city of Istria.

Left: Grecotel Amirandes, Greece. Water is an integral design element in this seaside resort on the north coast of Crete.

Right: Ritz-Carlton, Tamuda Bay, Morocco. WATG utilised the low-lying wetlands to create villa islands and a waterfront village.