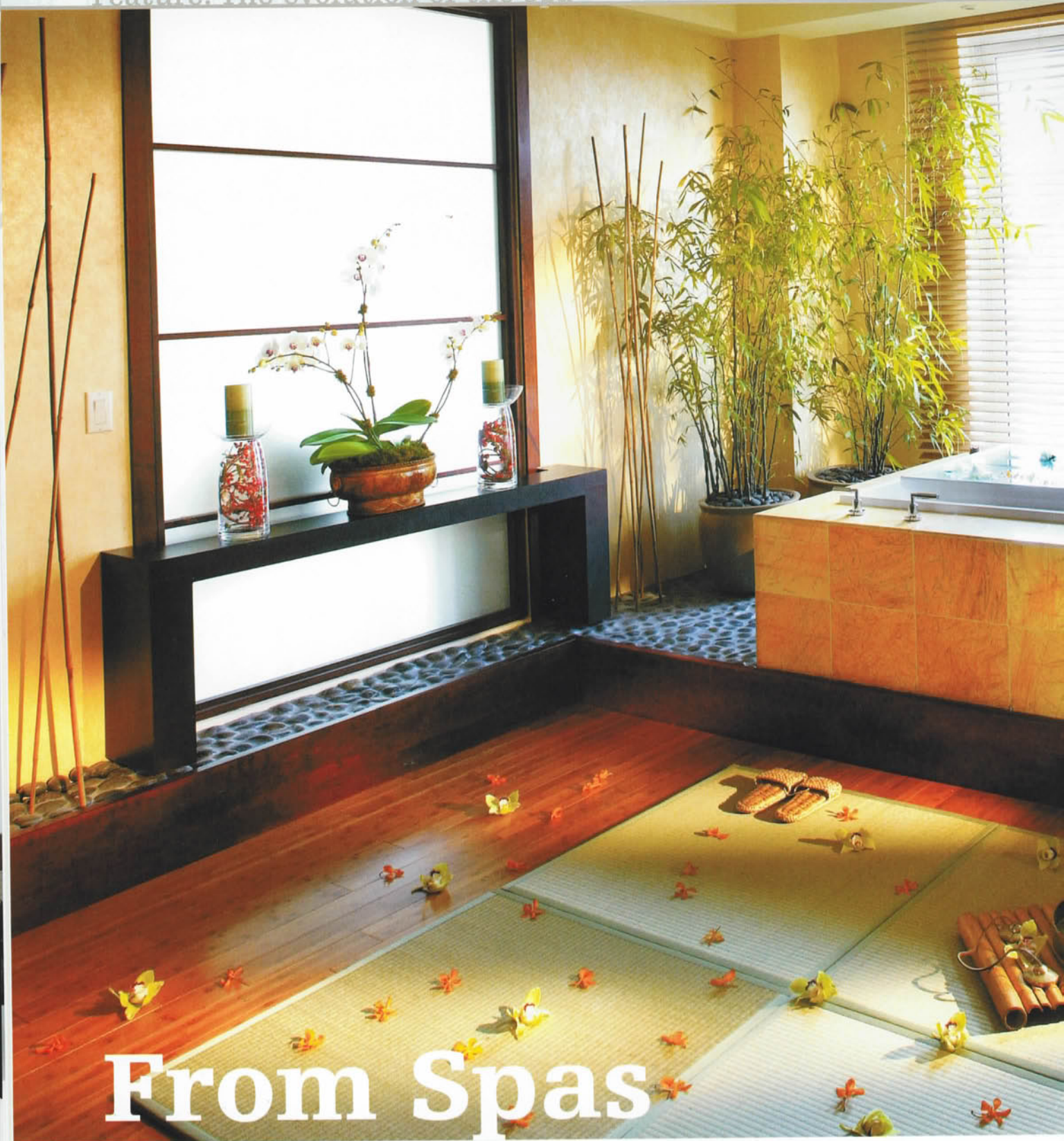


Feature: The evolution of the spa



From Spas to Spa Rooms

Markus Stebich – master spa designer – offers a brief insight into the history, culture and development of the spa in modern societies.

By Reshma Mehra



Serenity Room



Mandarin Oriental, Miami

The sensibility of wellness has seeped into the modern lifestyle in such an indelible way that it has become almost synonymous with good health and relaxation. With the mercurial stress levels involved in modern societies and specifically in urban areas and the resulting exhaustion of the body, people have swiftly become aware of the impact of mental and emotional stress on their physical bodies. As they begin to place more and more emphasis on alleviating these stresses, spas have begun to take on a temple-like importance and holidays, whether short or long, tend to be centred round the concept of holistic recovery. >





We have a huge responsibility because we deal with these issues every day. It's our responsibility to be informed about what those issues are and then to pass that knowledge on to our clients and to the other people that we work with.



Markus Stebich



The hospitality sector has quickly caught on to the public's need for holism, incorporating elaborate spas into their menus. While almost all spas will include health clubs, steam rooms, jacuzzis and saunas, many are returning to historic practices and natural therapies from the world over to give their guests and clients a wider array of choices and approaches. Because atmosphere, ambience and appearance go a long way to relaxing the human mind, designing the spas and the spaces within which these therapies and treatments are imparted is just as important as having well-trained therapists. So much so that this area of design has turned into an area of specialty, where firms boast long-term contracts with luxury hotels and spas.

We had the chance to speak with Markus Stebich, managing associate at the Dubai office of Hirsch Bedner Associates Design Consultants, an international firm with a proven track record in spa design, about developing trends in the hotel and spa industries. He believes that the importance of spas in modern societies has come about as a matter of natural evolution and that we've already begun to see the development of the next stage in holistic personal care in hotels – the spa room.

As Stebich sees it, "It's been a slow evolution that has taken place over the last century. Bathrooms in hotels served primarily a functional purpose, taking care of the basic needs of cleaning. Over the years, with hotels becoming destinations in themselves, and people having less time for themselves, when they stay in a hotel, they want to spend quality time in their rooms. A big part of that is the bathroom – the area that has some of the basic requirements for a space to function as a spa. Hotels need to bring people down to a de-stressed level from their high-energy days. As a result, the definition between the bathroom and the guestroom starts dissolving to provide

one large space. The intention is for it to be a tranquil place where people can relax, unwind and do something about their mental, emotional and physical well-being."

Naturally, the effect of this change has been felt in more tangible ways than just the merging of the bath and bed areas. Stebich says that over the years, both, the bathrooms and guestrooms have gotten larger, with the bathrooms offering more features, functions and technologies. "There are just many more possibilities to relax and have a spa experience. These days, when you go to a hotel and you check into a guest room, it's not just about a guest room, it's about checking into a spa suite. These rooms have all the features and abilities as you'd have in a spa, so the guestroom allows for the possibility of receiving most treatments in-room, from reflexology and aromatherapy massages to use of the steam room, while the actual spa serves as a space for secondary or more active treatment," he says.

The additional benefit of the spa room is, of course, that guests can have their treatments at their own leisure, as opposed to working their days around specific appointments at the main spa. However, this luxury comes at a price. Just as spa retreats and resorts were the summer playgrounds of the rich and landed gentry back in the 19th century, spa rooms are the weekend retreats of today's wealthy. Working off the 'ask and ye shall have' philosophy, these spa rooms can provide almost any service for a price tag. Those willing to spend extravagant amounts will also expect extravagantly appointed rooms, fixtures, features and technologies. It would involve 'excess' in virtually every aspect of the room. Ordinarily, excess would equate to wastefulness, but Markus Stebich says that it is possible to keep wastefulness in check while still creating an opulent and indulgent spa room. >



Believing that the designers bear a huge responsibility to educate and inform their clients of the risks of waste and over-consumption, he finds that, "Large spaces do not automatically equal waste; small spaces can be just as wasteful if not more; if the furniture is made of wood from old grove forests which have been cut down specifically for the project. If the water used is in high volume and not recycled, and so on."

Stebich believes that the real questions to ask when designing these bastions of elegance and relaxation are, "what kind of technology and materials do we use to circumvent any additional wastefulness? Are the materials used in a responsible manner? Are they sustainable? Can they be replaced easily? Do they have a long life or are they materials that will exhaust quickly and be difficult to replace? What is the energy source being used and how is it being produced? Is the water recycled and, if not, what happens to it?" Trying to control these parameters not only helps make the difference, but it also helps create rooms that are in harmony with the environment they're built in.

Stebich contends that this trend towards spa rooms and luxury bathroom spaces has evolved over a period of time and has left so indelible a mark on architecture and design in general that there is a noticeable upward trend toward luxury, even in typical bathrooms in typical middle-income homes. "Larger shower-heads and rain showerheads are more common now than they used to be. Separate toilets and bathing spaces indicate an evolution towards the more open-plan bed and bathroom. Separate showers and bathtubs are very common in most homes now. Thirty years ago, bathrooms were smaller and had pure fixtures with less functionality. So as these hotel projects develop and are bared to the public, they always have an impact on what happens in the other categories or grades of the market."

Dipping into history for some context, Stebich says, "It isn't always that hotels offer ideas of luxury to private audiences. Sometimes it works the other way around. There are things that are in hotels that come from private residences. An English gentleman designed one of the first sunken bathtubs in the early part of the 20th century for a private



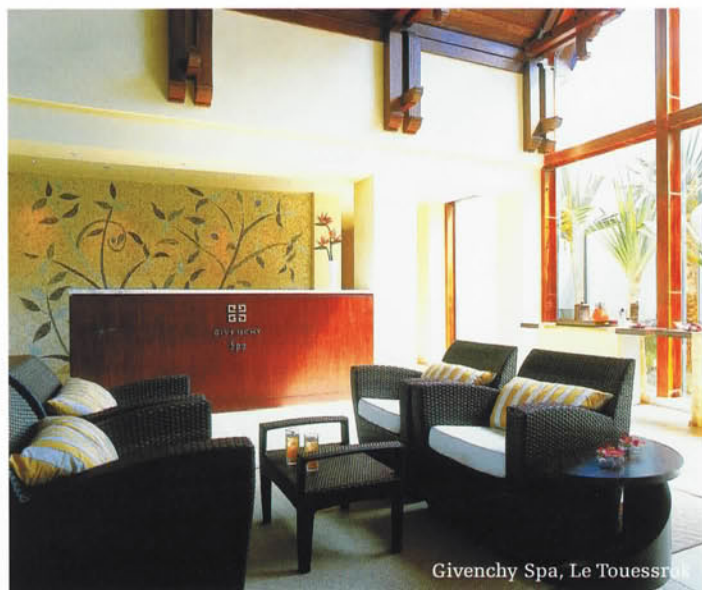
VIP spa room at the Mandarin Oriental, Miami

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The hotel spa becomes a destination for people in and around the area. Meanwhile, guests can stay in their rooms and have all the treatments they would normally have in the spa but at their own leisure, at their own pace and in their own space.

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Markus Stebich



Givenchy Spa, Le Touessrou

residence. Years later, it found its way into hotel bathrooms and other, more commercial, ventures. So it works both ways. It's a natural, evolutionary process. People will always come upon ideas of what is important for them to feel in harmony and in balance and try and incorporate it into their world. We find nowadays with globalisation that ideas and concepts and methods and rituals that have been around for millennia in various cultures throughout the world are being rediscovered. People become exposed to things that provide new approaches and new ways of taking care of themselves and pampering themselves." In turn, the fascination with incorporating old techniques and styles of rejuvenation offers endless possibilities for design consultants to explore their skills and create fresh spaces that eschew the standard spa feel for a more intimate and calming effect.

About Hirsch Bedner's approach to spas and spa rooms, Stebich explains that the firm works closely with the major international operators, currently working on several major projects including Hyatt, Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons and

Kempinski properties in the region as well as Mandarin-Oriental, St. Regis and many others globally. According to him, a lot of luxury hotels are moving in the direction of the ultimate service in pampering – the spa rooms. While several of these operators have been on this track for some time now, many more hotel groups, have also seen the merits of individualised spa rooms that accord guests with the ultimate in privacy and instant gratification.

To stay ahead of the pack is then the main concern for design consultants such as Stebich. To this end, their projects are always created keeping the specific needs of the client and the concept in mind. "The space itself is always custom designed. The materials are always tailored to the concept of the operator, and to the idea and brief that they've developed for that space; how they're going to operate it, the market, the clientele, the product and the corporate identity, they all play a role in it.

"When we select the finishes, the furnishings and the equipment for these spaces, on some things we can develop new products, on other things we work with the products that are already available. There are always a lot of new products coming onto the market, so in that sense, it's a matter of making sure that we are up-to-date with what's going on in the market, but it's also a question of the budget and the time and whether custom designing is possible."