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Robert D. Henry Designs a Chameleon: NYC's G Spa & Lounge



THE G SPA & LOUNGE

Detox by day:



The perfect 21st century business model
lives in the belly of The Gansevoort Hotel

BY REBECCA GOLDBERG

Retox by night



Photo by Dan Bibb

If there is a thread of duality, Robert Henry has woven it.

"This is the first of its kind and everyone in the industry said 'how the hell are they going to pull off a night club and a spa and have either one perform successfully?'"

G SPA & LOUNGE

Henry, principal of New York-based Robert D. Henry Architects, has worked in the spa industry for over ten years. In that time, he has completed some 20 projects—but never anything quite like this — G Spa & Lounge, a 4,300 square foot space in the basement of the Hotel Gansevoort.

By day, the space functions as a day spa; by night it turns into a bar and lounge and plays host to Manhattan's finest. The space is only shut down for approximately three hours a day, taking an hour and a half to transform into either identity.

"They can detox and then retox here — all the young darlings that frequent this place," said Henry. "It's so darn tight roped that even I can't get in."

"We were in the perfect environment to pull something like this off. Gansevoort already had this cool identity," he said of Andi Pepper's high-profile design. However, he notes that expectations and pressure were running very high. And above all else, "the challenge was to do this while still maintaining a certain quality of service, level of personal attention and intimacy."

When designing the space, which opened in February, 2006, Henry and his team asked themselves

Left: Scarlet glass and aqua water offset the neutral architecture; **Right top:** Pools can be enjoyed while detoxing or retoxing at the G Spa and G Lounge; **Right Bottom:** Henry uses water to create a textural element in the spa — one that appeals to the senses



Photo by Dan Bitt

"We were in the perfect environment to pull something like this off."

—ROBERT HENRY

the big question: "how can you make such divergent client expectations work?" And furthermore, how can they make them special?

They decided to house the spa in the basement — a nod to its proximity to the Hudson River, which separates Manhattan from New Jersey. "The thought of water-based treatments in that location seemed like a perfect marriage," he said of the property that sits inches above the water table.

"The initial challenges that we faced were working with a basement space with low ceilings, tons of mechanical and that low water table where if you cut in the slab, water from the Hudson River would start bubbling up," said Henry.

"We didn't suffer from ideas, but the complexity of the space. However, it's probably one of the most effective spaces, per square inch, that we've ever worked with. Coming



Photo by Michael Grimm

from New York City, we know that utilization of space is dualistic and multiple. And yet it is totally unique in its location and offers the complete New York experience. The collision of duality in the Meatpacking District and our whole detox/retax play fits within this neighborhood of fashionistas and meat packers who are rubbing shoulders at 3 AM."

It seems that this is the appeal for Henry — to challenge the senses through contradiction, contrast.

Indeed he caters to the senses as well, through his attention to detail and inclusion of elements that are designed to stimulate the mind as well as the body.

He wove the importance of water into his design by featuring three infinity-edge hydro pools, including a freshwater pool for treatments, as his focal points. "We have these hydro pools which are just across from the treatment rooms that have small monitors which can play rolling waves from New Zealand or picturesque landscapes. We marry the visual with the auditory in all of our work," he said.

"At night we change out the spa treatment table and lounge furniture goes in. From the treatment rooms, which overlook the pools, you can see those same monitors project music videos. It's very cool at night because the pools are open and sometimes they're plexiglassed over for dancing. It became a very fun play on duality," said Henry.

"So people are milling about with cocktails listening to the spilling water from



Photo by Dan Bitt

Top: A cabana for massages and later for VIPs; **Right:** By night, the treatment rooms bring in different furniture and guests show off their freshly pampered bodies

the pools and looking at the projection which might be the newest art film from Japan or you can be served by these water hostesses who wear short robes and flip flops. It becomes more like a house party."

The play on duality is found elsewhere in the space by way of contrasting hard and soft elements. Warm, scarlet red glass acts as a backdrop against a stainless steel bar. Cool-blue water pops against muted red lounge seating under semi-exposed ceilings. And laser spotlights pierce the

cloudy air in the spa's steam room.

"We began to think how we could interchange the different pieces that we're all familiar with. The treatment rooms become VIP rooms at night after they change out the furniture," he said.

Henry chose to subdue the furnishings and let the architecture do the talking.

"The furniture is more in the background, here, with treatment room walls made of scarlet red glass. It's an interesting inversion. The glass encapsulates the rooms and creates a cocoon-

ing effect. In some of these fixed areas, some of the glass is very powerful. At night that vibrant red creates social condensers," he said.

"This sensuous nocturnal grotto is something that we play with. We're sensuous modernists and we strove to expand the delivery system of wellness. It used to be 'if I look good, I feel good.' Now it is, 'if I feel good, I look good.' I present wellness — well-being from the inside out. That intimacy factor is a special element."

Coming from a self-pro-



Photo by Dan Bitt

claimed wannabe-centenarian, Henry feels that spas are a perfect match for his firm's philosophies — which are rooted in a desire to stimulate the senses. "We used sound from the pools and the sense of touch with hard and warm and soft and cold materials.

We chose to integrate the senses into an experience and think about more than what most architects consider — the visual. We'd like to think that you'd walk away and say, 'oh that smells good.' That's something that you're always trying to cre-

ate in the spa industry. That personalized experience."

"What I'm excited about is all these celebrities who are talking about how intimate and warm it feels and how it's different than all the other places that they've been. Maybe we've created

an environment where they can be more real. Maybe some of those models who just got off the cat walk can come here and let their hair down."

Maybe, as Henry concludes, it can take the edge off urban living. **BD**

Co-authored by Robert D. Henry and Julie D. Taylor, *Spa: The Sensuous Experience*, takes a hard look at a soothing industry.

The book profiles 50 spas from around the world and classifies them into seven categories: thermal, resort, wellness & medical, day spas, destination spas, thalasso spas and hotel spas.

Each of the 50 selected spas is examined from a site, design and treatment perspective.

Henry focuses on not only the design but how the experience of a spa can affect people. In fact, in addition to his design expertise, Henry has reportedly received over 300 spa treatments.

He starts out with an anecdote: "Whenever my two-year-old daughter takes a tumble and gets a boo-boo, the first thing she shouts is 'rub-it!' A simple comforting touch reassures and restores her sense of well-being."

