

design profile

bob henry

The founder of New York-based architects Robert D. Henry on working with Donald Trump and Steve Wynn, the rise of wellness communities and what he's got against the Roman bath



Why and how did you become an architect?

When I was seven, my great aunt asked me whether I wanted to be an architect or engineer. I knew what engineers did and was clueless about architects, but I thought it sounded more interesting. What really nailed it for me was growing up in Chicago and taking part in an architectural walking tour of Frank Lloyd Wright's home, studio and commissions. Chicago is a tough town where engineering is as important as design, and where Meis van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright pitted slick modernism against a sensitive humanist approach in architectures that are proud and muscular.

I studied at the University of Illinois with disciples from both camps. In my third year, I went to study in Versailles, France, at the

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Ecole des Beaux Arts, which opened my eyes to European culture and history. It was the first time I'd been on a plane and I've been travelling ever since. I then apprenticed for three years in Chicago and New York, before returning to graduate school at Columbia University, New York, the pre-eminent design school at that time.

How did your career progress?

I worked for a lot of talented people: Jim Nagle in Chicago, William Pedersen in New York and Philip Johnson, the godfather of architecture in NYC. They had a tremendous impact on my career.

While working for Philip Johnson, he summoned me to his office to grill me about an international competition in which I'd taken second place. He wasn't easily accessible and I thought he was going to fire me, as you weren't supposed to freelance. But to my surprise, he said: “Tomorrow we have a meeting regarding an important new building in Dallas. I want you to work with me on this.”

I learned much more from Johnson than just architecture. Through his wit and charm, he taught me the importance of maintaining good business relationships.



RDHA has started designing a 'wellness community' in Santa Fe (above), in which the spa lifestyle is incorporated into housing and work space

HENRY'S TRACK RECORD

- Obagi Medical Spa Beverly Hills, California, USA (in progress)
- Gansevoort Hotel New York City, USA – spa, fitness, lounge, conference room (in progress)
- Sanjevani Wellness Centre Santa Fe, USA – guest villas, conference room, spa, pool, tennis (in progress)
- Wynn Resort Las Vegas, USA – spa, fitness, VIP rooms, retail (opened 2005)
- Spa Orient Retreat Taichung, Taiwan (opened 2004)
- Queen Elizabeth Hospital Rotorua, New Zealand (planning study 2004)
- PGA World Golf Resort & Spa St Augustine, Florida, USA (opened 2004)
- Grand Hotel Quellenhof Bad Ragaz, Switzerland – hotel, thermal water park, medical centre (planning study 2003)
- Ajune Center for Beauty Synergy New York City, USA (expanded 2003)
- Amelia Island Plantation Spa Florida, USA (opened 2001)
- Ajune Center for Beauty Synergy New York City, USA (opened 2000)
- Cobella Akqa Spa London, UK (opened 1999)
- Danielle Spa Bonita Springs, Florida, USA (opened 1998)
- Avanti Spa Manalapan, New Jersey, USA (opened 1997)
- DePasquale Parsippany, New Jersey, USA (opened 1995)
- Mar-a-Lago Club Palm Beach, USA – spa, salon, café, fitness studio (opened 1995)



When did you set up your own practice?

After working for six years and receiving a teaching scholarship at the University of Michigan, I began a partnership with a talented rainmaker, Ronette Riley, working mostly on innovative residential commissions. We started out by opening an office on the top floors of the Empire State Building. We were young and crazy and while Ronette was preoccupied with finances, my consuming interest was design. After two years, we went our separate ways. In 1991, I found humbler digs downtown and began my own practice with a clear design focus.

How many people do you have on your team?

We generally have six to 10 architects and interior designers, and my personal assistant. We're more of a horizontal than a vertical organisation and we follow a lucid design process that strives toward unique solutions. We've been called 'the boutique firm that does sensuous modern design'.

What do you specialise in?

We specialise in hospitality design with a clear focus on unique spa environments. Our point of differentiation is our empirical approach of engaging all the senses. We like it when someone says, 'their work smells good!' We're obsessed with carefully orchestrating an experience-based journey, integrating sound, touch, sight, taste and smell. We believe this makes us a perfect match for the touch-based spa industry. The spa vibe has influenced all our work, from nightclubs to residential and commercial projects.

What was the first spa project you worked on and what lessons did you take away from it?

In 1995, we started work on two different spa projects: the very private Mar-a-Lago Club and Spa in Palm Beach for Donald Trump and the very public day spa, DePasquale, for Carmen DePasquale in Parsippany, New Jersey. Both were notable for



different reasons. DePasquale is the highest-grossing day spa in North America per square foot, a good example of design attracting dollars. Mar-a-Lago complemented the depression-era EF Hutton/Marjorie Merriweather Post estate and is one of the only projects on America's National Register of Historical Places for both exterior and interior architecture. It also featured on US reality TV show *The Apprentice*. The lesson we learned was not to be intimidated by landmarks – or Donald Trump!

The courtyard at the Spa Orient Retreat (above); the Gansevoort Hotel, New York City (top left), where RDHA are in the process of transforming two spaces



'Sensuous modern design' is the firm's trademark, which is stamped on the Spa Orient Retreat, Taiwan (left) and Ajune Center, New York (right)

How do you select projects?

Our clients interview us and we interview our clients, in a comfortable exchange aimed at ensuring we're a mutually good fit. We engage 50 per cent of the time, passing on potential clients if we determine that our expectations or theirs might not be met.

Who do you compete with?

Ourselves. We're running our own race! Our entire team strives for a personal best. We cheer our victories and try to mitigate our shortcomings through encouragement and education.

How do you approach a project?

Concept! Concept! Concept! We begin with intense brainstorming sessions to establish our client's unique position in the spa community. This part of the process is really exciting, as clients share their vision and have fun with us, exploring possibilities that most would not dare to embark on. We review the resulting concepts and discard those that hold less promise in order to single out the strongest possibilities. We then define the salient planning, architecture and interior design issues of the project and assemble a consistent design team that can commit to the entire process.

A clear mission statement, team organisation, defined roles and design guidelines are established in order to uphold the established design concept. Further development of the project requires regular meetings with the design team and consultants, honing in on the operational and functional aspects of the project. Hitting financial and construction benchmarks is the Achilles heel in the design community and we have been successful in achieving both.

What have you worked on recently?

Steve Wynn's newly opened resort, casino and spa in Las Vegas, where we designed the spa, the fitness area and the boutique. Mr Wynn is a true visionary and was a blast to work with. He challenged us at every juncture and set out to create the new platinum standard for the Strip.

Our design credo was: "There is a lot of artifice in Las Vegas, so the first person to introduce pure design integrity will create the difference." Making 44,000sq ft (4,000sq m) feel intimate and personal was the biggest challenge. I'm particularly proud of the changing areas. The walkways are lined with cabinets of towels, leading to semicircular water suites with mineral-soaking pools, custom deluge showers and plunge pools. This entire area is surrounded by bamboo, which filters light from hidden skylights. In contrast, the airy relaxation area is drenched in sunlight.

Operationally, we used a trick from Japanese Noh theatre, where the support staff dress completely in black, becoming invisible against the black background while orchestrating stage changes. We designed the spa's support, mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems to 'disappear' along with staff circulation so as

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not to detract from the guest experience. A separate circulation corridor rings the back of the treatment rooms, allowing staff with laundry bins to navigate the hall without disturbing the guests.

Roger Thomas of Wynn Design and Development selected the finishes and furniture to complement our spatial configuration. His use of texture adds layers to the space, while his striking use of eclectic objects creates a surreal promenade reminiscent of early films by Jean Cocteau.

Another recent project of ours is Spa Orient Retreat, a day spa in Taichung, Taiwan, which was a finalist for the 'Best Hotel or Day Spa' at this year's Hospitality Design Awards. The 7,000sq ft (650sq m) spa, which opened late last year, is the new flagship of the Orient Retreat group, which operates 17 spas in Asia and America.

The two-storey building has a buff limestone and glass exterior and houses a spa, salon, café and retail space. Central to the design is a meditative courtyard, dominated by a reflecting pool traversed by a wooden bridge and perfumed by exotic flowers and trees.

What are you currently working on?

On the west coast, Dr Obagi, a renowned Beverly Hills dermatologist, has commissioned RDHA to create a four-storey wellness centre in the prestigious Beverly Hills triangle. In collaboration with LA film creatives, we're working to redefine the spa retail experience and capture the spirit of the place, LA-style.

The glass facade of the building engages passers-by using a series of display cases, which each contain a recessed projection screen. The effect is to turn each floor-to-ceiling window into a giant movie screen, while 'floating' glass shelving showcases the Obagi retail line. Inside the spa, retail and medical areas wrapped in pear wood bring a warm and intimate feel to the space. On the retail side, a circular consultation room made from Smart Glass can be changed from opaque to clear at the flip of a switch, providing space for discreet consultations. Lavender suede furniture coverings, oversized marble slabs and water elements offset the high-tech features of the design.

On the east coast, we're working on two innovative spaces at the top and bottom floors of Manhattan's fashionable Gansevoort Boutique Hotel – a distinctive spa/private club on the lower level and a lounge/multipurpose media room on the rooftop, both currently under construction and expected to open later this year.

The spa and private club is designed to be both a soothing and relaxing environment for spa-goers by day and a sleek private club by night. The space is finished with marble columns, pools and teak furniture and accents. The design features crimson glass planes lit to create an inviting glow. Three infinity-edge tubs are available for spa-goers to enjoy a relaxing soak and an evening cocktail.

What are the current trends in spa design?

We're increasingly seeing synergy emerging in spa, hospitality and residential design. Many of our clients visit our spas, then ring us up and ask us to design their home or business environment. They

BOB HENRY: FAVOURITES

Book *The Agony and the Ecstasy – A Biographical Novel of Michelangelo* by Irving Stone

Film *Undercover Brother*

Place Venice in the fall; Shanghai in the winter; New York in the spring; and Hawaii, which provides endless summer all year

Food Any culinary delight created by my fusion wife Nancy (Shanghainese-German)

Leisure Activity Wrestling with my six-year-old son Bo and seeing my two-year-old daughter Chloe smile

Spa Red Mountain Spa in Utah

Spa treatment Shiatsu – usually once a week

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don't just want to visit the spa, they want to integrate it into their daily routine, producing healthier and longer lives. This concept is now morphing into 'wellness communities' – a new, almost utopian, hybrid model, where the community is designed to integrate wellness for the mind, body and soul. We're just starting to work on two of these projects in Santa Fe and Costa Rica.

What challenges do these projects present?

The Costa Rica project, an awe-inspiring site on the Pecos River, poses many challenges due to its scale: 1,200 acres of eco-sensitive design coupled with complex water-rights issues. The location of the crescent-shaped spa, on a promontory overlooking the river, has been chosen to have the least impact on the natural terrain. In order to integrate the building into the land's natural contours, we've delicately staked out its perimeter within the site. We've reinforced the interplay of inside and outside, specifying local materials so that the spa integrates with the landscape, and we've incorporated green design, natural drainage and energy efficiency.

Designing a building that is site-specific, beautiful and sensuous, while working with a delicate ecosystem, requires extra sensitivity and planning. Developing a synergy in a diverse design team is also challenging on larger-scale projects like these. Consultants bring independent opinions and it is very important to maintain a clear and powerful design concept that can be shared by the team.

What are your pet hates in spa design?

The oversimplified, iconographic recreations of historical sites: the Roman bath, the Japanese onsen and the Turkish hammam. Yuk!

What do you like most about your job?

The spa industry people are the best. They're the kinder, gentler sorts. Care givers are a special breed. In this strung-out world, stress management is the key to longevity and the spa industry helps us achieve those ends. ●

Spa Orient Retreat in Taichung, Taiwan (left), was a finalist in the 'Best Hotel or Day Spa' category at this year's Hospitality Design Awards

