Architect of Serenity

BY PATRICIA SHEEHAN, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Architect Robert Henry takes ultimate leisure seriously, combining a solid technical base with the highest ideals of engaging the senses to create stunning, leading-edge spa design.

The first thing you notice is the voice. Calm, soothing tones that put the most harried, deadline-facing writer at immediate ease. Hunched shoulders slacken, tense neck muscles loosen and an iron-gripped pencil relaxes in the hand. Sit back, and take note of one of the few designers in the world to specialize in the spa industry. Robert Henry—dreamer, spiritualist, teacher, author and design expert—shares what it takes to create the ideal place to rejuvenate the spirit, reconnect with the senses, and achieve the perfect balance of mind and body.

Meanwhile, reconcile this laid-back image with achievements that even the most Type A personality would find hard to match: Palm Beach's Trump Mar-a-Lago, New York's Ajune, New Jersey's DePasquale/The Spa, and London's Cobella Akqa, to name a few. Current projects include the eco-sensitive Amelia Island Resort in Florida, and a book on the world's most exotic spa destinations. As president of Robert D. Henry Architects, New York, Henry heads a full-service boutique firm offering planning, architecture and interior design, including specialty lighting and custom furniture.

Engaging the Senses

For Henry, spa design aims to involve the five senses, starting before a client even enters the spa. "I think the design has to carefully orchestrate one's experience," he asserts. "Even before you enter the spa, you need to move through a sort of decompression zone. Perhaps that might be a walk through a garden before you get to the front door.

"The first thing one touches is often the door handle, so we try to create something unique there. It might be hand-wrapped, say, in copper wire. Copper is sort of a medicinal reference used in many cultures to promote health. The door might open a little differently—perhaps it might have offset pivot hinges.

Robert D. Henry

Clients claim they feel a sense of equilibrium immediately upon arrival at Ajune, NYC.

"So one begins this whole transition from an outside life to an interior world," he continues, "transitioning from one's normal working life into a more exotic environment, one that's sensuous. And that's where we try to affect the whole environmental condition.

"We're able to engage the senses through aromatherapy, where we take the HVAC systems and over-oxygenate the air—that gives you a sense of euphoria; it builds a heightened sense of consciousness. First you engage smell and then, very lightly, the sense of taste. We engage sound though water elements.

"What we're trying to do is calm and soothe and slow down the body's reactions and begin to create one as more of a clean receptor, where you're starting to engage single instances at a time."

Influences and Inspirations

All these lofty references belie Henry's simple, working-class origins. Born in Hyannis, MA, he grew up in Joliet, IL. "Everyone in my family prior to myself worked for GM. I was destined to be the third generation to work in this factory," recalls Henry. "Fortunately, I had a very influential high school English teacher. She took me on a walking tour of Chicago to see the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. I think that single moment was pivotal and influenced my interest in architecture. I was the first in the family to go to college."

This teacher's influence later indebted Henry to education, which is why he not only teaches, but has declined to take positions in more prestigious universities in favor of a state-supported school where he gives back the gift he says he was given. "That was a very important opportunity for me, where a professor or teacher really made a difference in my life and affected its course or direction."

After receiving a Master of Architecture degree from Columbia University, Henry worked with renowned architects Philip Johnson and Bill Pederson of Kohn Pederson Fox. For 10 years he has conducted an overseas program focusing on the work of Andrea Palladio and Carlo Scarpa in Venice and Vicenza, Italy.

What triggered his interest in spa design was a book by Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*. "She's combined the history, philosophy and cultural differences and influences regarding the senses. In terms of architecture, I don't know if it really has been pursued outside of the visual and the tactile. What captured me was the possibility

Ajune clients journey through the Hall of Whispers en route to treatment rooms (left). DePasquale Day Spa's interiors (right).

of trying to create a new architecture that responds not to theoretical or conceptual types of attributes but something that's very visceral.

"I myself am a real believer in the spa business," Henry says. "And I wouldn't say I'm a health fanatic, although I think I'm in good shape and run marathons for enjoyment. I get a massage generally once a week and I believe thoroughly in stress reduction and management." Henry figures he's partaken of about 200 treatments.

What defines good spa design to Henry? "When possible, a beautiful, natural setting. There's nothing that can replace, in terms of an experience different from our daily lives, a communion with nature, so that would be on the top of the list" he says. "We're also trying to create signature treatments—unique treatments that are relative to the location of a spa, its identity and its setting. So, if we're near the ocean, having water treatments like the therazzo component would be very important. If we're in the Midwest and there's an association with the American Indian heritage, and it's heartfelt—not something treated similar to Disney—but if there's a real cultural interest there, I think that brings relevance versus what I consider a dislike of mine, which is theming. For example, the Egyptian spa or Roman Bath spa that has very little cultural relevance. Yes, there's an essence of escapism there, but I find it to be rather thinly veiled."

The Spas

Of all Henry's spa projects, perhaps the one that most closely mirrors his design philosophy is the recently completed Ajune Medi-Spa on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Spa clients have noted that they feel a sense of equilibrium upon arrival. They begin their journey along the "Hall of Whispers," traversing an ephemeral environment to prepare for a luxurious treatment. An elongated passage with a glowing white scrim, the Hall is infused with the sound of falling water from a nearby fountain. "The feeling of the space is very sensuous, very cocooning, very comfortable and yet at the same time exotic and unique," says Henry. "So you move from this austere, white environment into a more earthy, warm area. We contrast constantly from large/small, warm/cool, to create these changing moods and experiences." Ajune was commissioned by a renowned plastic surgeon, Dr. Mauro Romita, who focuses on skin care

Candlelight and soft music add to the soothing environment in treatment rooms at Ajune.

with several treatments he offers, some more medically oriented, like dermabrasion.

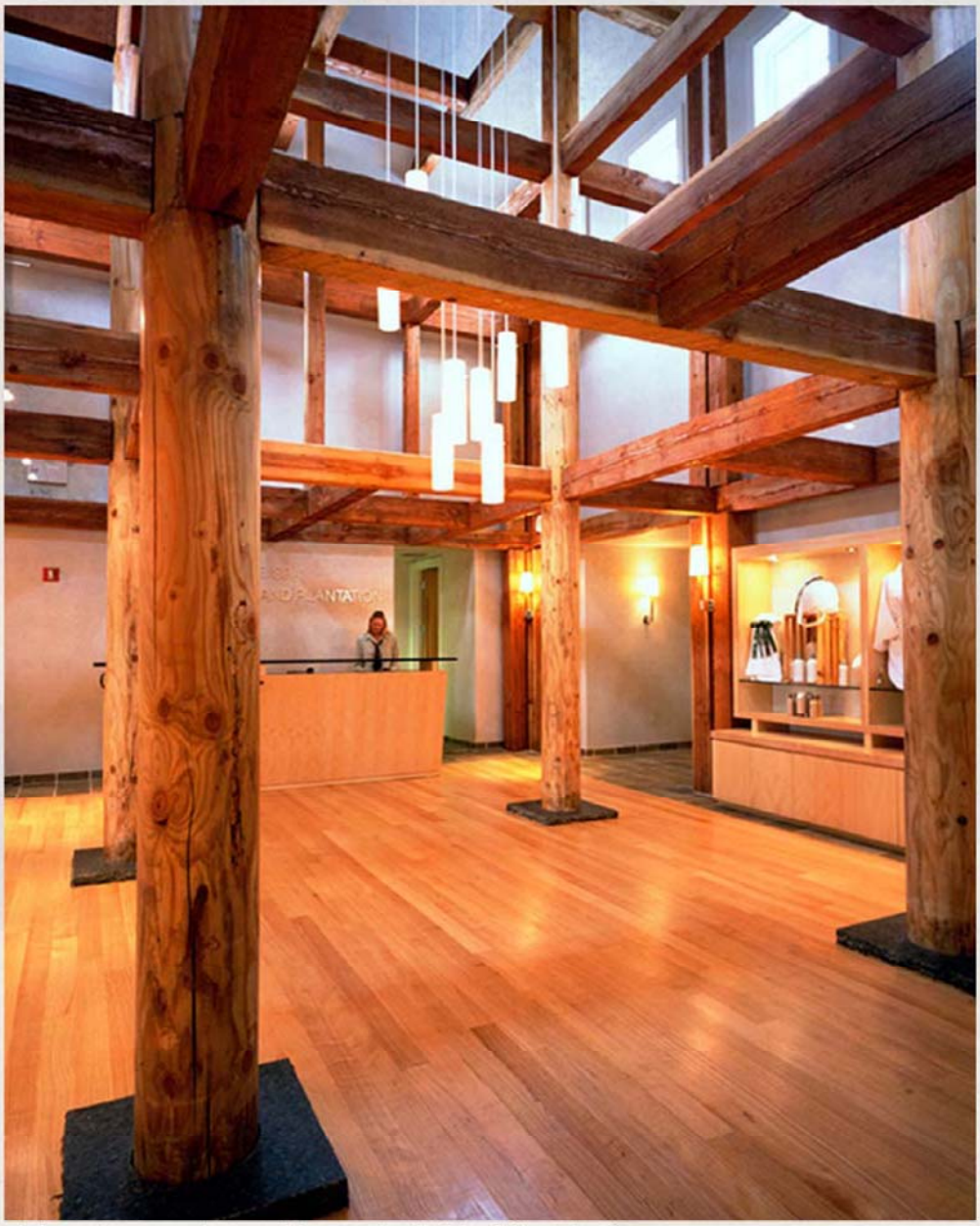
Among Henry's favorite projects is one he's currently working on for the Amelia Island Plantation Resort, Amelia Island, FL, slated to open next summer. Henry is planning an eco-sensitive facility to complement the pristine unspoiled atmosphere and maintain a delicate balance between nature and the built environment. The scale of the 16,000-square-foot project is mitigated by breaking it down into a series of pavilions that are nestled around a meditation garden.

"There are 150-year-old Sweet Water oak trees that we have you take stairs around, up in through the branches and trees," marvels Henry. "We're taking a very light touch in addressing the environment and really letting nature be the special experience. So all the treatment rooms have plantation shutters that open up to a view of the water. One will be able to get a massage and experience seeing a crane land in the pond, hearing the birds chirping and smelling the Spanish moss."

Tin roofs, exposed wood beams and covered porches will define the exteriors, reflecting the vernacular architecture of the Old South. At the Amelia Island spa, the signature treatment of watsu (guided water yoga) will be offered.

For DePasquale/The Spa, Short Hills, NJ, Henry expanded an existing 4,000-square-foot hair salon into a 20,000-square-foot total beauty and wellness center. A curved, hand-rubbed plaster wall guides visitors along earth-toned slate floors, custom pear wood cabinetry and a signature treatment room clad in recycled glass mosaic tile—a Henry hallmark.

DePasquale spa has received numerous awards and magazine covers and was heralded as the most popular spa in North America. But Henry deflects the accolades from himself, recognizing instead the talents of its owner, Carmen DePasquale. "In large part the success of the spa has to do with Carmen and his passion for the industry and excellence and working relationship. What we created there in terms of a signature treatment was a couples room. This has been a fantasy for my wife and me, thinking it might replace therapy. A couple takes a soak for about 20 minutes, and everything is sized for the couple with the tub just large enough to sit in and be submerged up to the shoulders. The tub has about 120 whirlpool jets and juices and fruits are



A dramatic entry welcomes visitors to Amelia Island Plantation Spa.

brought in. You really get to talk about things face to face, and there's no escaping each other." The room is candlelit with scents such as chamomile and eucalyptus.

Following the soak, the couple showers, then each person gets a massage. "We've had to develop the tub to fill and drain in approximately 20 minutes—that's about 230 gallons. So there was a lot of R&D in order to accomplish that. The room was extraordinarily expensive, a huge investment on the owner's part, so surprisingly or not surprisingly, it's been his most popular service. He has recouped his investment and it's become his signature treatment."

Perfect Partners

With its 10th anniversary this year, Robert D. Henry Architects finds business booming. But it aims to stay small, emphasizing the highest quality of project work over quantity. "I feel that you're only as successful as the people you surround yourself with and I feel very fortunate that my wife (Nancy Wu) is a designer, so we have an opportunity to work together," notes Henry. "It's an interesting blend of Eastern and Western sensibilities, even though it seems like culturally we've switched hats."

Henry goes on to praise other associates like Nicole Migeon, project architect for Ajune. "She's extraordinarily talented. Many of the people who work with me were former students, so there's just a real compatibility there. You get to know the student not only in terms of their academic prowess, but their social awareness and personality."

Henry sees no slowdown in the growth of spas, citing the need for counteracting the stresses of keeping up with high-speed technology. "As technology accelerates, there's this yearning to humanize or hold on to these human elements," he notes. "Like there's nothing that touches the heart more than a handwritten letter, which is much more visceral than reading an e-mail. In essence we try to create this balance in our lives. And I feel this is why the spa business has completely mushroomed."

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