



ANANTARA KIHAVA VILLAS MALDIVES

# ED POOLE

AN INTERVIEW BY LIM SIO HUI

Architect Edward Poole won't talk about signature styles and is adamantly against following any rules in design. "We can be schizoid if needed, or understated chic," says the Singapore-based American. His firm, Poole Associates, has overseen the F&B design of some of Asia's top hotels, such as the award-winning W Retreat & Spa, Maldives; the newly-renovated Blue Ginger and Blue Bar at the historic Taj Palace Hotel, New Delhi; a W hotel in Bali and the St. Regis Bangkok. We asked the design maestro about what makes or breaks the design of hotel F&B spaces.



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**Q:** Your firm designs hotel F&B spaces, but not the rooms. Why is that, and what's the difference between them?

**A:** F&B and rooms are specialists fields, with F&B being 'one-offs' and the rooms being mass production, which are totally different mind-sets. Even the selection of furniture manufacturers will be different as some factories refuse to do specialty work. As a company of only 6 staff, we are geared for the one-offs, and surround ourselves with furniture makers, sculptors, and artists that take pride in creating special items.

**Q:** How consistent do you think the design of the F&B outlet should be with the rest of the hotel?

**A:** It depends. For the past 10 years or so,

we have consistently been commissioned to do F&B spaces in hotels because the operators did not want them to look like the rooms, or other public spaces. You can instantly tell when an entire hotel is done by one designer; it often leads to repetition and design asphyxiation.

**Q:** What seals a good experience for you, personally, in a restaurant or bar?

**A:** Service without knowing it. Having staff that attend, but are so unobtrusive you don't know they are there.

**Q:** Are there any design solutions that can help to improve this kind of 'invisible service'?

**A:** Yes, there are. For instance, by placing

the waiter stations so that the staff never turn their backs to the customers. This has to be worked out in the early planning stages.

**Q:** What do you consider to be your most important role when taking on a hotel F&B project?

**A:** That what we are designing is going to work for the target market, is going to be on time, on budget, inventive and a good sensory experience.

**Q:** To be inventive and a good sensory experience. How do you convey that?

**A:** Think of it as watching a play in a theatre. There can be an actor doing a dramatic monologue, with dozens of people on stage in black, changing the set right in front of

you, but you don't see them. Lighting is crucial. The designer can highlight, hide or give importance to objects, spaces and sequences of spaces through good lighting.

**Q:** What kind of design concepts do you think work best for hotel F&B?

**A:** There is no definitive answer here. It is all up to the hotel's core values and branding goals. Design-wise, we currently have traditional Moroccan, extreme Japanese, Asian tapas, coastal Mediterranean and Chinese-Tibet-Mongolian-Indian concepts on our boards under design.

**Q:** Is there anything you think a hotel shouldn't do?

**A:** We will do something trendy if asked, but we would rather create a timeless look. How can you make designs more timeless? Take our design for the Taj Palace Hotel New Delhi. The furniture designs are from the 1920s, the ceilings and walls are quite modern, and there are a couple of light fittings that are very trendy. If they date, we can just remove them after a few years, and the room will stay fresh. When the entire design is very very trendy, that's when it doesn't last.

**Q:** Have you observed any trends in the industry?

**A:** I think what's happening is that there is a blurring between what is considered to be a nightclub is and what is considered to be a

restaurant. We use the term "eatertainment". You can have a group of people who are dining in the same room as a different group of people who are drinking and staying the whole night.

**Q:** Are there also changes in the designers' approach?

**A:** Designing restaurants is becoming a more holistic experience. I think that designers should not rely so much on outside consultants for some functions which can't be separated, such as lighting. There are design firms that have a more integrated approach. Sometimes their in-house team can do the writing or design the staff uniform, and I have also heard that some will even do staff training. ■