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Mondrian London

Tom Dixon builds a special relationship with Sea Containers House

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Mondrian

L O N D O N

Tom Dixon's Design Research Studio has worked with EPR Architects to create a scheme inspired by the Anglo-American relationship for Morgans Hotel Group's new London hotel

Words: Matt Turner | Photography: Niall Clutton

“I was interested in the idea of the Anglo-American relationship – trying to pick the best of London and the best of New York,” says Tom Dixon of his designs for Mondrian London. “When we looked at the building, and its proximity to the river, we thought it looked like a giant transatlantic cruise liner that has docked on the Thames.”

In fact, this brutalist monolith of a building was originally designed as a hotel by Centrepont architect Richard Seifert, though that plan was never realised. Instead it became the offices of shipping firm Sea Containers upon completion in the mid-1980s. American designer Warren Platner – best known for his furniture designs for Knoll, as well as the ill-fated Windows on the World restaurant atop the World Trade Center in New York – was commissioned to repurpose Seifert's original designs.

Developer Archlane Ltd secured planning permission to redevelop the site in 2011. Morgans Hotel Group were signed up by asset manager Deerbrook to operate a Mondrian hotel, designed by Design Research Studio – the interior and architectural design





Above: In the lobby, a giant copper wall feature inspired by the hull of a ship leads from reception through to the restaurant, alongside a blue resin sculpture referencing British naval heritage and American pop art

wing of Dixon's eponymous brand, within an external envelope by TP Bennett Architects, which also contains the new London headquarters of advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather and sportswear brand Puma.

Design Research Studio took the golden age of transatlantic ship travel as their departure point: "We've got this dramatic copper hull, inspired by the Cutty Sark, that sweeps in from outside, through the lobby and into the restaurant – that forms a backdrop for the whole stage setting," says Dixon. A giant sculpture in the heart of the lobby, resembling the links of an anchor chain rendered in bright blue resin, alludes to both maritime heritage and American pop art. Other nautical references include a scale model of a cruise ship loaned by the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, and the porthole style lighting behind reception.

The Anglo-American theme is more than just a design narrative, explains Dixon: "The hotel is being operated by an American company in London. And on one side of the hotel, we have an American chef, Seamus Mullen, using the best British produce from nearby Borough Market. On the other, one of London's leading contemporary cocktail bar operators [Ryan Chetiyawardana of White Lyan in Hoxton] has created a cocktail menu inspired by both Prohibition-era New York and botanical British ingredients."

The Sea Containers restaurant has a classic American diner aesthetic,

with a yellow submarine suspended from the original concrete ceiling coffers, above a stainless steel bar counter, surrounded by scalloped, mustard banquettes and burgundy leather dining chairs. Tom Dixon-designed Glass Bead and Glass Top pendants illuminate the space.

In Dandelyan, the aforementioned cocktail bar, a backdrop of racing green panelled walls and parquet flooring is accented with polished brass fittings and vivid pink banquette seating. The Den area in between the restaurant and cocktail bar features an eclectic selection of vintage furniture, alongside naval instruments such as a deep sea divers helmet, a telescope and a pair of binoculars.

With 359 guestrooms and suites, a restaurant, two bars, spa, meeting rooms and cinema this is the largest commission to date for Design Research Studio. EPR Architects were enlisted to work with Dixon's team on the internal planning, structural design and services.

"The building is a T-shape," explains Tom Hupe of EPR Architects. "Although from the outside it looks like a straightforward series of boxes, the amount of variation within is incredible. The south block contains 240 standard guestrooms, but it was the opportunity to create suites on levels three-to-five of the north block, with stunning views of the Thames, which really opened things up. You would assume that the building having originally been designed as a hotel would make it easier. Although we had access to the original plans, the 1960s guestroom footprints were much narrower than you would



Above: A yellow submarine sculpture is suspended from the original ceiling coffers above the stainless steel bar in Sea Containers restaurant

have nowadays so everything had to be completely reconfigured. We had to work around the existing structure of the building, which is very delicate, despite being heavyweight in appearance.”

Contractor Byrne Group was employed to undertake the substantial redevelopment of the building, not just to create the new hotel but also to open up the frontage to the River Walk, insert office space through the east and west wings and construct a new office building in the south west car park, including ground floor retail space.

The biggest architectural intervention is the addition of a glass block at the top of the building. As Tom Dixon explains, this enhances the cruise ship liner appearance of the exterior, as well as accommodating the twelfth floor rooftop bar Rumpus Room.

Warren Platner’s work on Sea Containers House in the 1970s led to commissions to create the interiors for two of his lesser known projects, the Sealink cross-channel ferries Fantasia and Fiesta. These works have informed Dixon’s approach to the rooftop space, which he likens to the ballroom of a ship, with an Art Deco inspired bar in patinated brass, deep red banquette seating, and a cluster of Moooi Raimond lights set within a polished brass, mirrored ceiling void. The hotel’s location in the curve of the Thames between Blackfriars Bridge and the Oxo Tower means the outdoor terrace – the deck of the ship if you like – offers uninterrupted views to St Paul’s in one direction, and Westminster in the other.

Many of the bedrooms and suites also offer river views. “We wanted the rooms to have a feeling of a cabin, with everything fitted,

compact and properly thought through,” says Dixon. Gun-metal grey woodwork and brass detailing feature alongside bespoke artwork and furniture from Tom Dixon. Suites also feature desks inspired by Dixon’s Slab furniture series, Gubi Cobra table lamps by Greta Grossman, and Warren Pletner’s wire armchairs for Knoll.

O’Donnell Furniture supplied bespoke casegoods and cabinetry: “The standard bedroom furniture consists of one seamless unit which flows from the entrance door to the bedroom wall, including a wardrobe with pink internal drawer unit, integrated bathroom door, curved minibar unit with open display section, floor-to-ceiling headboard and integrated wall panelling.” The marble lined bathrooms feature vanity units in brushed stainless steel, custom-made stone sinks and Corian counter-tops.

Chelsom supplied the specialist lighting solutions to the guestrooms. Matte black fittings with brass features accentuate the bold colour palette. Fixed to the headboard, wall lights feature oversized brass rotary dimmer switches and multi-directional teardrop heads with retrofit LED light sources housed behind a frosted glass lens to offer both reading and mood lighting in a soft white ambient tone. The desk lamps feature an oversized tubular head and large brass rotary dimmer switch, while the conical spun metal shades of the floor lamps are finished in brass and lined in white.

Other details include glass coathooks, large bedside lamps with simple, intuitive dimmer switches, and beautifully engineered brass trays for keys and loose change.



Above: Standard guestrooms feature gunmetal grey casegoods by O'Donnell Furniture, bespoke keytrays by Tom Dixon, and specially designed bedside lamps with oversized brass rotary dimmer switches by Chelsom.

Elsewhere, Chelsom also refurbished a series of more than 30 original Cliff Tribe wall lights dating back to the 1950s including double lights and triple pendants. The original Sea Containers fittings were taken off site and refurbished by a team of restoration experts at Chelsom's factory where they were cleaned, refinished and rewired to incorporate retrofit LED light sources making them compatible with the exacting energy requirements outlined in the brief.

"What's fantastic about designing a hotel is you're not just designing one space," says Dixon. "Agua Bathhouse & Spa is my first spa for example." Spa guests check in at the original reception desk for Sea Containers House now relocated to the basement. The spa has been inspired by the traditions of ancient bathhouses, to create the feeling being submerged in a dreamscape of underwater tranquility. The centrepiece of the design is a brass sculpture resembling a water droplet, surrounded by relaxation areas behind sheer drapes. There are six spacious treatment suites and a steam room connected by luminous pathways and curving limestone walls.

Another first for Dixon was the opportunity to design the 56-seat

cinema: "My memories of cinemas from the period of this building in the early 70s were of dense, saturated colour and graphic shapes." Acoustic panels, reminiscent of the bolts holding together a ship's hull, are combined with luxuriously upholstered cinema seating. At weekends, Curzon take charge of programming to show the arthouse films, with midweek dedicated to private screenings. There are also six flexible meeting and event spaces.

The 'special relationship' theme even continues through to the lifts, where floor-to-ceiling photographs depict various American and British figures: an astronaut (actually Dixon in a 70s spacesuit) alongside a Pearly King in one; a tattooed semi-naked male model and Queen Elizabeth 1 in another.

"For us a hotel is a dream job," concludes Dixon. "It allows us to work in so many different typologies – spas, bars, restaurants and bedrooms, conference rooms and corridors. We don't like to impose a singular style on a place, we like to provide surprises and a journey through the space. The idea that we can create a complete universe that people can live in for a night or a week, what's not to like?"

EXPRESS CHECKOUT: 359 guestrooms | 1 restaurant | 2 bars | Spa | 6 meeting rooms | www.mondrianlondon.com

Owner: Archlane Ltd Operator: Morgans Hotel Group | Architecture: TP Bennett / EPR Architects | Interior Design: Design Research Studio

For full photography of this project and details of the companies involved visit www.innspec.com