

Guy has designs on luxury

For top designer Guy Oliver, true luxury hotel design is all about uniqueness of personality

Interview **Andrew Youngson**



Guy Oliver

His first job might have been in the Navy but it was upon coming back to shore life that Guy Oliver's career really took off. The world-renowned interior designer left the forces at the age of 24 to pursue the career he had always dreamed of.

Returning for a short time to his parents' then abode in Moray Place, Aberdeen, Guy soon reached out to interior designers

in the area and found his first break with respected designer Sylvia Lawson Johnston. Buoyed by the experience he received under her tutelage, Guy's success ultimately propelled him London-wards, where he soon established himself as an interior designer of considerable vision.

It was at this point that his relationship with Claridge's hotel in Mayfair began and, 20 years later, he is now recognised

as one of the top designers for bespoke luxury five-star hotels the world over – not to mention the stunning spaces he has designed for private residences, yachts and embassies. The 45-year-old was even hired to redecorate the state rooms of 10 Downing Street.

With such an illustrious portfolio, what insight can Guy offer into how to design for luxury hotels?

Hello, Guy. What kind of designer do you consider yourself to be?

I think some designers have a recognisable look, but for me each project is different because I'm trying to reflect the personality of the client.

A lot of people get their taste from reading magazines, but they are often scared of drawing on their own personalities. But I think the nicest homes, and the best projects I've worked on, are the ones that reflect the personality of the person who lives there.

Fera restaurant at Claridge's, (pictured left) which you designed, just opened this year. How did you bring together the work of an organic chef like Simon Rogan into a traditional hotel such as Claridge's?

What I wanted to do was make the restaurant feel authentic. I wanted it to be true to Claridge's and recreate an original space, but to use certain colours, textures and materials that would reference Simon's food. There was £5million spent on the restaurant in five months, but everyone walks in and think it's an original space.

So we had to do things like reintroduce new metalwork, marble and ceilings – that was about getting the surfaces and architecture back to what felt authentic. And then I painted the whole room in a gallery grey to anchor the whole space. It's almost like a gallery for Simon's food.

It's a very grand space, but, once you're in it, you feel very calm and relaxed because of the ways I've used the colours. I think people can walk in there in jacket and jeans, or a suit, and feel equally comfortable. It's a beautiful room, but it doesn't feel intimidating.

What are the hallmarks of a luxury five-star hotel?

Well, you get perceived five stars, such as chains for example the Four Seasons. They have a wonderful product but often a lot of the rooms will be the same or similar. The stuff I work on, I try to treat more like a residential project, so that you create a personality that feels unique to the place that you are in.

The reason people go to hotels such as

Claridge's and the Connaught, or Chateaux Marmont in LA, where I've also worked, is because they want things that are unique. And that's true luxury. It's not about a label, though of course that can be great. In my opinion, true luxury is about making something that's unique and bespoke to you. That's the message I've learned over the years.

I have to ask, do you get to stay at the hotels you work on?

Yes I do. But the weird thing is, because I'm at Claridge's every week, and everybody knows what you're doing, you kind of want to go to a hotel to be anonymous. I pretty much know every chambermaid there so, if I stayed, they would be spying on me (laughs). Every time you design a room or a suite, you get a free night. So I ended up giving my parents five nights because I had built up this credit. It was so funny: my mother thought that breakfast was included. So I ended up with this huge bill because she couldn't figure out that it was just the room that was free. So no good deed goes unpunished, I guess.

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