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Back to the future of hotel design



Rising trend: André Balazs in his Manhattan loft

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Rose Jacobs visits the home of André Balazs, the hotelier who reversed the home-from-home concept

André Balazs does not have a high opinion of travel and design journalism. “Right now the visual and written vocabulary used to describe places is very corrupted,” the hotelier asserts. “A young writer can make a Ritz-Carlton hotel sound just like a fabulous little boutique and vice-versa.”

Yikes, was that a warning? Even if it

was delivered over rosé and the sunset-stained rooftops of SoHo?

The man behind hotel hotspots from New York to Los Angeles has graciously opened his own apartment to scrutiny, and, apparently, would like to see precision in the resulting description.

To start off, then, the Ritz it is not. Nor is it a slick Manhattan bachelor pad. The space, a three-bedroom, 5,000 sq ft loft, is in fact closest in feel to a boutique hotel – namely The Mercer, which Balazs created and owns, across the street.

Of course that may say more about the

hotel than it does about the flat because, says Balazs, The Mercer was modelled after a big house. “You stumble in and you’re in someone’s living room. Then there’s the café, which is more private. It’s sequenced that way. The front porch is the most public part and then the parlour, and then more intimate spaces.”

Stumble out of the elevator into Balazs’s own home, and you find yourself face-to-face with a 4ft x 4ft Francis Bacon. Turn left and you’re on the brink of an open-plan living/dining room, where you teeter briefly before succumbing to

the pull of three walls of windows that frame the city outside.

The furniture and layout feel almost incidental to the spectacular view. That's not such an unusual sensation in a high-end Manhattan loft, but the accoutrements here are even more understated than one might expect. Much of the seating has the feel of benches in museum galleries. You slump down for a long look at the sky over the Hudson River in the same way you might stagger back and sit a while before a Monet or Sargent at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Well, actually, it's less like the Met than, say, P.S. 1 (a trendy gallery for contemporary art) thanks to a platform occupying one corner of the room, on which chaise longue, Chiclet-shaped couches provide soft, low-slung viewing decks for sunsets. (Sunsets, by the way, are Balazs's fetish. His bedroom window also faces west.)

The bedrooms of Balazs's two teenage daughters, who split their time between this apartment and their mother's place four blocks away, have a similarly contemporary yet playful aesthetic. One daughter's room showcases a bright red rug by Kristian Gavaille with a built-in stool near its centre, creating the impression that a rotund bobcat has curled up under the thing. The apartment also has a playroom, half of which is filled by a massive, 12-ft-long bean-bag-style mound. "The Turd" as the girls call it, partly obscures a carpet that doubles as a four-player Twister board – or rather, "Hipster", an iteration of the original game invented by the Balazs family.

Above Hipster and The Turd hang old-fashioned gymnasium rings scavenged from Balazs's Standard Miami hotel, which was a renovation of the Lido Spa, built in 1953. In the front room, Balazs has fashioned a bench out of a princess-and-the-pea pile of 5-inch-thick, caramel-brown leather exercise mats taken from the older hotel's gym. You can unstack them, too, and drag a little piece of mid-century Miami over to the open fireplace, perhaps, to pad a patch of floor on a cool night.

Does it sound like the entire Balazs household is designed for a lot of lying around on the ground? Several pieces by

Sérgio Rodrigues, the Brazilian designer, elevate the experience: a white leather couch, the frame of which is held together by wooden pegs, and a dining room set similar to the clean-lined pieces that Balazs's Hungarian parents bought during a stint in Sweden before settling and raising a family in Boston.

If the Rodrigues pieces are an example of European sensibilities with a new-world twist, so too is Balazs's business enterprise. Through careful planning and clever execution, his boutique hotels (which include Hollywood's famed Chateau Marmont) returned intimacy, individuality and concerted hospitality to an industry that had been mostly focused on replicating safe, sterile lodging, with little variety from location to location.

"[We] go back to the old days of what a hotel was," Balazs says. "It used to be just a few rooms above the local pub, and you checked in, and you checked into the lifestyle of the proprietor... We're creating an environment that people check into, which means they can check out of where they've been... It's a tremendously liberating thing. It lets you reinvent yourself and become who you want to be."

Talking about the relationship between where you sleep and who you are gets Balazs more excited than enumerating

'An environment that people check into...means they can check out of where they've been'

..... the designer furnishings he owns. Even as a graduate student at Columbia University's journalism school, more than 20 years ago, he circled the subject in his thesis about the flophouses and missions that dominated New York's Bowery street from the turn of the century until recently, he quotes a minister as saying: "When you talk about skid row, you have to understand that street men are here for a reason...They're here because in no such place else can they live the life

they choose to live and get away with it."

"Homes should and do reflect where you are at a particular time," Balazs says today. He calls his SoHo loft "transitional" and "reactionary" since he moved here after the break-up of his marriage two years ago. And although there are personal touches to add warmth – a Picasso-esque sculpture he made in school, bookshelves full of work written by friends, a bust of his father – the space does feel somewhat transitory.

"Basically, everything here is like a hotel," Balazs says, explaining that staff from The Mercer bring food to his apartment, take care of his dry cleaning and deliver his magazines. It sounds like an attractive lifestyle, and indeed it's one he has started to replicate in residential property developments. Amenities at 40 Mercer, a 40-unit building down the street from the hotel to be completed in Fall 2006, include breakfast room service, a concierge, in-house parking, a gym and a spa modelled after Russian bath houses.

Since Balazs's own building is like most buildings in New York, with no public spaces – a "paradigm" he says he'd like to change – he finds community in the neighbourhood. He walks to work at the Puck building on nearby Lafayette Street and dines almost every Sunday with his family at a local Japanese restaurant. When Fanelli's, a 150-year-old bar and café with a red awning visible from the bar at The Mercer, found itself in financial trouble, Balazs helped.

The hotelier's latest project, near Wall Street, is designed to further blur the line between hotel and home, drawing residents from private spaces upstairs down into common areas.

Writers, you see, may lazily describe the complex as they would any old high-rise in neighbouring Battery Park. Photographers might make it look like every featured interior in Wallpaper magazine. But if the development manages to feel like rooms above a pub – or a loft above a real community – it will take more than a little journalistic imprecision to mar the triumph.