FANTASY LAND

Inside the world of design genius PHILIPPE STARCK, whose whimsical, surprising creations continue to delight after more than 40 years

STORY BY MARK C. O'FLAHERTY PORTRAIT BY JAMES BORT

COVER STORY



IF THE SKY WAS THE LIMIT,

what would Philippe Starck's fantasy hotel look like? The visionary creator, who has designed more than 10,000 distinct products, 220 architectural projects and, as of this summer, 43 hotels, knows precisely. It nearly happened. "It was going to be in a remote part of Iceland, in front of the sea," says Starck from his James Bond-like "cave" office, high on a mountain in Portugal. "The location appealed to me first. It had a wow factor beyond the usual parameters. It couldn't be reached by car, only with a STOL, the tiny plane that can take off with 100 feet of runway. On one side of the hotel there was going to be a plane warehouse where you could enjoy a cocktail with the pilots; on the other side, a shipyard where small wooden boats were built and tested. There were going to be fireplaces everywhere for people to gather. The concept was to really take you elsewhere." Disappointingly, the project hit a wall: "The guy I was working with turned out to be a little cuckoo."

Starck's fully realized projects more than compensate for any missed opportunities. When he designed the Royalton in New York for hotelier Ian Schrager in 1988, he changed what a hotel could be. Sleep was just one of the experiences now on offer. "Boutique" was coined as a recurrent prefix. One of Schrager's closest friends, fashion designer Norma Kamali, remembers the first Starck-designed concepts: "You could be sure you'd always see something completely new," she says. "Starck had a twinkle in his eye. Ian and Philippe changed the way people used hotels. It became an entertainment, and an experience worth copying by many."

While many of Starck's early projects have vanished or been refurbished out of recognition, others have become living museums, and new ones continue to appear. "I don't think about the past," he says. "For me everything is a continuum. I still want to use surrealism for fertile surprise. Design is now a commodity—you don't remark on a good design hotel, just a bad one. Design for hotels is dead. I work on another level now, creating a space without gravity. I distill elements that my clients can mix together as clues to tell a new story. I make things that are sentimental and welcoming. Something can be expensive but have no soul. I create for human relationships, not to show how much something cost."

PAST AND FUTURE MEET

On the day we talk, his latest project—Villa Colette in Cap Ferret on the French Riviera—is about to open. It's a 28-room glow-up of a 19-century building in Arcachon Bay with a powder-pink and mahogany palette and striking multicolored section of tiled roof. Meticulously lined monochrome photographs in mirrored frames bring typical Starck sheen. Like his Brach hotel in Madrid, which opened last year, it takes visual cues from the way Europeans socialized a century ago but does something futurist and playful with them. "It's a small hotel with a lot going on," he says. As usual, he worked to his own gleefully weird, detailed and scripted



LEFT
Louis Ghost chair for Kartell, 2002
OPPOSITE
Villa Colette, Cap Ferret, France



narrative rather than a mood board: "It's about micro surprises rather than grand gestures. For a backstory I was thinking about Micheline Presle, Danielle Darrieux and Michèle Morgan, wonderful French actresses from the first half of the 20th century. I imagined this place was somewhere that Danielle may have lived between the two world wars and then came to retire at the end of her career, filling it with heirlooms from the 1930s from her grandmother, souvenirs of her career, and furniture she had brought from her Parisian apartment and countryside house in Courgent. I wanted poetry and sophistication."

Villa Colette marks 40 years of Starck's work in hotel design. Back in the 1980s, Schrager was the kingmaker in hospitality who led Starck to a throne. Everyone knows about Schrager's Studio 54, but it was the opening of the nightclub Palladium on East 14th Street in 1985 that really flexed Schrager's architectural muscles. Japanese architect Arata Isozaki (also working on plans for MOCA in L.A. at the time) created one of the most epic clubs ever, seven stories of theater with illuminated postmodern elements. Schrager had already opened his first hotel, Morgans, the year before, working with designer Andrée Putman, but subsequent hotels would all be Starck projects, starting with the Royalton. "I had seen Philippe's work in a design magazine," recalls Schrager. "He had redone Café Costes in Paris. It was a reinvention of an age-old traditional French bistro or café. It was provocative, daring and playful. It broke all the rules and was completely modern. I thought if he can do that with a traditional French café burdened with rules and traditions, he could do it with a hotel."

SOMETHING NOBODY SAW BEFORE

While many remember the exclusivity and private parties as the defining factors of Schrager's hotels, they were also fundamentally successful properties with rooms that people wanted to book. "I'd always thought bathrooms sell hotel rooms the way kitchens sell single-family homes," he says. "Philippe didn't have any experience doing a hotel and he was a free spirit, with no preconceived ideas. He could do something nobody

→



ever saw before."

Duravit has been making Starck-designed bathrooms since 1994. Through them, objects conceived for hotels have had a second life in domestic interiors. "Starck says that true creation must come from love, poetry and humor," says Lüder Fromm, chief marketing officer for Duravit AG. "You can feel that in the way his designs shape a space. They create an atmosphere of calm and focus, where every line follows a natural gesture, every surface invites touch. Ergonomics and aesthetics are not separate considerations for him."

Those bathroom items have become classics, but so have other pieces of furniture that Starck created to furnish his hotels. The transparent Louis Ghost chairs for Kartell are now part of the vernacular of modern design, propelling Versailles tropes into the realm of science fiction. When Starck pieces look vintage (like the oh-so-'80s Café Costes chairs), they take on the status of antiques from a more optimistic age, similar in spirit to the limited-edition Marc Newson Lockheed Lounge that he added to the lobby of the Paramount hotel in New York in 1990. Starck has always been ahead of the curve: An identical Newson Lockheed sold for $3.7 million at auction more than ten years ago. You'd never get to sit on one today.

It's not just about tiles and taps with Starck projects. Fantasy is the driving force. It was there in the *Alice in Wonderland* Delano hotel in Miami Beach in the mid 1990s, with its vast white doors and sheer curtains, and then the various optical illusions—the hallucinatory stretched sofas in the lobby and landscape paintings on the ceiling above each bed—of the Sanderson in London in 1998. The Maison Heler Metz in France, which opened as part of the Hilton's Curio Collection last year, is one of Starck's most whimsical fables to date. Architecturally, it is a simple and weird metallic interpretation of a 19th-century château on top of a brutalist tower—a house in the clouds, with bedrooms featuring castanets and tambourines. But there's a lot more going on behind the scenes. Starck developed an elaborate surrealist fiction involving a 30-year-old inventor named Manfred Heler and his curious and impossible adventures involving swamps, elevators, submarines and toys. It became a whole book, published by Allary Éditions. "The wooden origami paper plane in the story is something we created for the bar at the hotel," says Starck. "And we used rose and gold in the restaurant because Manfred is in love with a young woman called Rose, though in my story he doesn't really know what love is."

STORIES TOLD BY CHANCE

The machinations of Starck's imagination are incredible. When he was staying in Tokyo in his early 20s, he opened two or three bags of garbage left on the street every night to get forensic insight into Japanese life. "Garbage doesn't lie," he says. And on a trip to San Francisco during Pride some years ago, he played one of his favorite games, turning the handle of every door on a single walk. Passing through any unlocked portal took him, eventually, three floors down into a building where he encountered a secretive ceremony with a group of men crowning a new queer king of the city. He loves stories told by chance, because truth can be stranger than fiction.

"I am neurodivergent," he says. "It's one of the reasons why I created so much symmetry in the spaces I designed early on. Symmetry is boring, but serene." Starck's version of symmetry has never been pedestrian. In 1984 his Café Costes was →



FROM TOP
Brach hotel, Madrid; Maison Heler Metz, France

"For me everything is a continuum. I still want to use surrealism for fertile surprise."

THE SURREAL WORLD

STARCK CLASSICS

From Florida to France, some of the designer's iconic interiors



PARAMOUNT NEW YORK CITY (1990)

Schrager and Starck rebooted a building as a "super YMCA" with rooms featuring headboards decorated with a blown-up copy of *The Lacemaker*. Downstairs, the lobby featured a checkered floor and Marc Newson Lockheed Lounge.



DELANO MIAMI BEACH (1995)

This was Schrager and Starck's white-on-white extravaganza, with an epic hallway running through the building, exaggerated proportions defining all the furniture (as well as the doors and columns), and countless feet of billowing sheer curtains.



LE MEURICE PARIS (2007/2016)

Starck transformed the public areas of the classic grande-dame hotel facing the Tuileries Garden in the aughts and came back a decade later to create one of the most spectacular hotel restaurants in the world for Alain Ducasse: Le Dalí. The aesthetic, inspired by the surrealist Spanish artist, showcases Starck's ingenious use of mirrors in an already impressive large space.

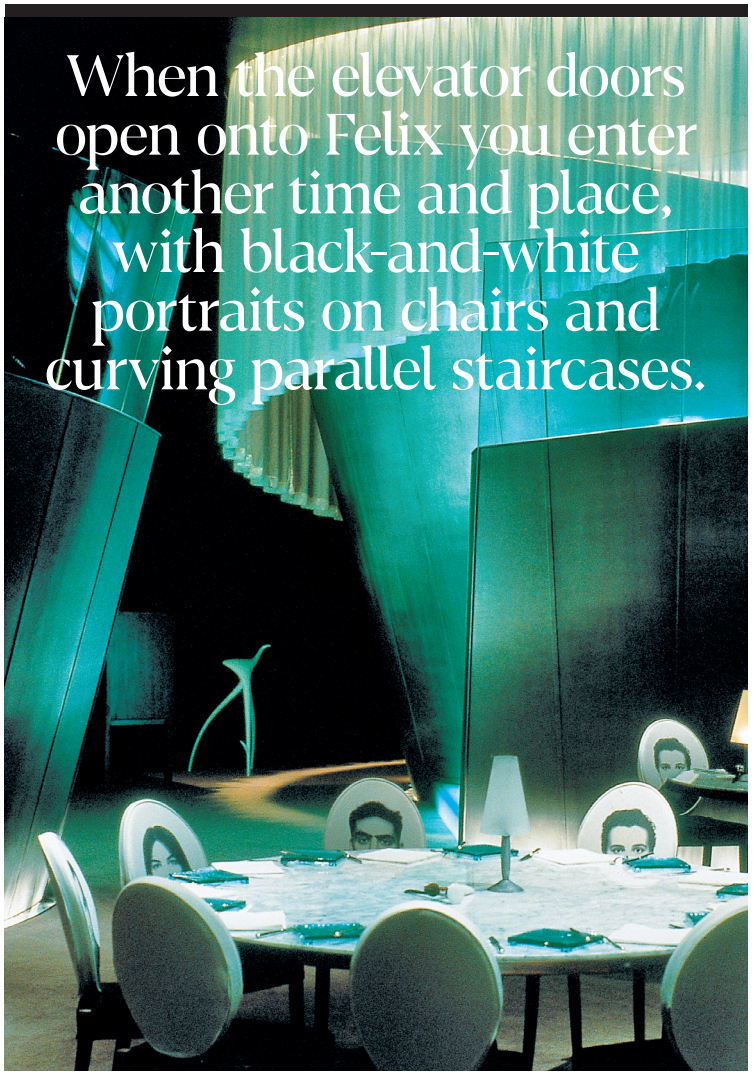
a radical gesture, with the perfect diverging lines of a floor pattern and staircase leading to a backlit central clock. While the restaurant closed long ago, preserving only images of it as a definitive style statement of its decade (and its chairs selling for fortunes at auction), his Felix restaurant in Hong Kong—which opened ten years later—is still there on the top of The Peninsula hotel. The rest of the property is classic Asian luxury, but when the elevator doors open onto Felix you enter another time and place, with black-and-white portraits on chairs and curving parallel staircases to the upper levels, with each step underlit like a set from a *Star Wars* movie. There is a thrilling symmetry. The Peninsula acknowledges what it has in terms of history, serving a '90s-themed cocktail list as a knowing wink to design aficionados.

A MYTHICAL QUALITY

One of Starck's favorite hotels isn't something he had a hand in—it's an ACPV design, by Antonio Citterio and Patricia Viel. "I have been staying at the Bulgari in Milano since it opened in 2004," he says. "It's the best hotel in the city for spending an evening with friends, as well as the quality of the pillow, the light, and the views." These are all things he prioritizes with his own projects, which he approaches as "villages—places to put people together at a time when we are less connected than ever before." He has always thought of a fireplace in a house as the heart of a home, where a family assembles to be close to something glowing and warm. And he wants to replicate that dynamic in each hotel. "This is why I put so much work into the bar areas of a hotel. It has to be warm, with the right light. I always draw comparisons between hotels and beehives—honey attracts bees, so the bar is the sugar in the middle of the hive of a hotel."



FROM TOP Sanderson hotel, London; Felix restaurant at The Peninsula, Hong Kong



When the elevator doors open onto Felix you enter another time and place, with black-and-white portraits on chairs and curving parallel staircases.

The SLS hotels that Starck created in Beverly Hills in 2008 and then Miami Beach for Sam Nazarian had a lot of sugar in them, conceived as ambitious blockbusters. "It's about giving Philippe the opportunity to create with a budget he didn't have with his early hotels with Schrager," said Nazarian shortly after the California hotel opened. In 2008 Starck also designed the first branch of the budget Mama Shelter chain in the 20th arrondissement of Paris. The dichotomy is pure Starck. He once designed a $35 flyswatter for Alessi and recently put his signature to a luxed-up leather version of his Volage Ex-S Night bed (described by manufacturer Cassina as "a hotel suite in the bedroom"), which retails for more than $20,000.

A room at that original Mama Shelter can sometimes be booked for less than $100 a night, and the bar and restaurant are as fun and experiential as any Starck has created, with guests invited to draw on the ceiling with chalk. "I am not comfortable with the idea that only the rich can go into my hotels," he says. "There are young people who will become geniuses who have no money. No matter the price point, I make sure everyone has the same sense of dignity and leaves feeling they have had an elevated experience, filled with freedom and creativity."

Starck was creating spaces that would have been bait for social media long before the Internet was in common use. But some of those early interiors aren't even documented comprehensively. They have developed a mythical quality. You had to be there. In an age when design is commissioned to interrupt the infinite scroll, has the associated technology impacted his process?

"I am lucky," he says. "I make what I want. In the 1990s budgets were lower and things had to be simpler and more graphic, which is why they would have been perfect for social media. I don't do anything for the money and would never create anything just for social media." Fortunes are spent in the hospitality industry on committees of people who can deliver just a fraction of the Starck sensation. He is a singular force, continually creating the unexpected. As Ian Schrager says: "He may be the most original thinker I have ever worked with." **BT**

IMAGES JAMES BORT; JULIUS HIRTZBERGER; GETTY IMAGES; GUILLAUME DE LAUBIER; PIERRE MONETTA; TOM VACK; PHS GENERAL DESIGN SCA