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JEAN-MICHEL GATHY, THE ARCHITECT WHO HAS WORKED WITH ULTRA-LUXE RESORT BRANDS SUCH AS AMAN, ONE&ONLY AND CHEVAL BLANC, SKETCHES OUT HIS VISION FOR POST-PANDEMIC TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY.

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With projects spread out across the globe, from New York to Panama, Thailand, Moscow and even Saudi Arabia, home is the last place visionary architect Jean-Michel Gathy should be. But it's exactly where he has found himself since March last year, when he made a flying visit from his base in Malaysia to Thailand to monitor how the construction of the Four Seasons Bangkok, one of his designs, was progressing (it opened in December 2020). He's thankful for – yet growing somewhat tired of – technology like Zoom, which allows him to manage his work from a distance. But it doesn't come close to replacing the impact of visiting a site firsthand. "When you build something, you feel like you need to go inside, but we can't right now so it's very frustrating," he says.

Despite the heavy blow the COVID-19 pandemic has dealt the travel and hospitality industries, Jean-Michel says he has never been so busy in his life. "I work every day until midnight at least," he says. Of course, there have been casualties, such as the nine or so (of 40) ongoing projects that have come to a standstill or been cancelled. But when you're the

name that every ultra-luxury hotel brand wants to hire, for every lost commission, there are many more opportunities waiting in his inbox. "Every single day, we have two offers on the table," he explains. "It's amazing."

The French-Belgian architect's lucky break came when he was asked to design Aman's Amanwana resort in Indonesia in 1993. Since then he – and his team at his Kuala Lumpur based design-firm Denniston – has worked with the likes of One&Only, Banyan Tree, Cheval Blanc, Park Hyatt, Armani, Mandarin Oriental and St. Regis. "Our business is exponential," Jean-Michel explains. "The more you do, the more you get known for being good at it, and the more jobs you get asked to do." It certainly helps that his designs are not only nice to look at, but they also make money. "Hospitality design isn't a trophy hunt, it's a business," he says. »

He admits that he is itching to get on a plane again but is also a realist and appreciates that we are six months away (at the time of writing) from anything like a resumption of travel (and that's a conservative estimate). And, as someone who has a history of setting trends rather than following them, he has no



Left: Four Seasons Tokyo at Otemachi
Above: Viceroy Snowmass, Colorado
Below: St. Regis Lhasa

shortage of ideas of what the world of post-pandemic travel will look like — and how that will be reflected in high-end hotel and hospitality design.

“People will look for low-density places, where there are fewer people,” Jean-Michel says, adding that he predicts a boom in outdoor tourism. “Mountain treks, climbing or sports-based holidays like golf, cycling and sailing. When you’re on a sailboat by yourself, you’re not taking any risk.” Certain holiday traditions – such as eating every meal in a (preferably different) restaurant – will be out, replaced by an uptake in demand for room service. “Along with private villas, people will be looking for hotels with isolated pavilions and private swimming pools where they can eat breakfast, lunch and dinner,” he continues.

By very definition, high-end resorts are ready-made to respond to these changing definitions of travel. It’s the three- and four-star hotels and those built on all-inclusive concepts that will feel the biggest strain, Jean-Michel says. “Top class resorts will remain in favour. The more exclusive the hotel, the less contact you have with others.”

More restaurants, but with fewer tables, and more lifts, but with a smaller capacity, are just some of the adjustments he predicts will be progressively integrated into hotel design. He also believes we should expect many more sensors in our rooms. “Remote controls and switches will be replaced by voice command,” he explains. “Any surface that needs to be touched will be addressed such as door handles, light switches, vanities and taps.”

And, he says, the transformation is already playing out without us really noticing it. “If someone had told you six months ago that every time you entered a building your temperature would be taken and a location code scanned, you would have told them they were crazy. Now we do it without question,” he says. “Within a year or two, we probably won’t even realise that there’s

a machine taking our temperature when we step inside somewhere.”

We need only to look back to recent history to understand how such shifts are integrated progressively. “After 9/11, the whole world shifted in terms of security. At first, we were disturbed but, today, it is part of our lives,” Jean-Michel explains.

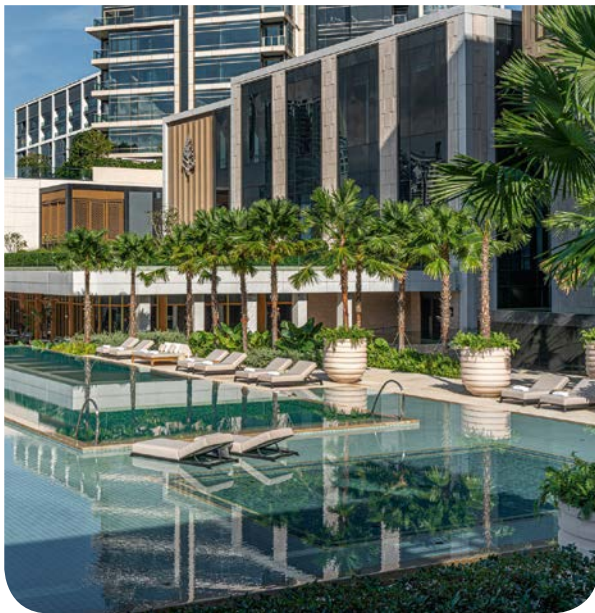
Having worked with the most exclusive names in hospitality across an illustrious career, what is left for Jean-Michel to achieve? “If it’s purely hotel design, I’ve worked with the very best in the world so I can’t do much better in that sense,” he says. Instead, it’s the integrated nature of projects like The Island at AMAALA, a luxury development on Saudi Arabia’s Red Sea coast, that drives him today. “I have 15 different products on The Island, including a museum, marina, academy of performing arts, hotels, country club and equestrian centre. To be able to bring all these things together gets me very excited.”

He’s now in the fortunate place of picking and choosing who he works with – but that doesn’t mean he’s taking the simple route. “I need a challenge, something new and creative,” he says. “If it’s too easy, it’s not for me.” ■



A CREATURE OF COMFORT

What is Jean-Michel’s ultimate idea of luxury? “Comfort,” he says. “A proper shower, more than one restaurant so you don’t have to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner in the same place, and a gym, especially for people travelling for business. Comfort, not beauty, is what makes a great hotel. But if it can be beautiful, too, that’s even better.”



Left: Aman New York
Above: Four Seasons Bangkok Praya River

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