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sleeper

HOTEL DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT & ARCHITECTURE



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Intercontinental - Park Lane, London

Reardon Smith Architects, working with designers J2 Design, KCA, RDD and Ivana Feingold, have recently completed a £60m refurbishment that looks set to put Intercontinental's London flagship firmly on the map.

Of all the famous hotels on London's Park Lane, the Intercontinental has historically been the least high profile. Lacking the glamour of The Dorchester, the hip factor of The Metropolitan, the sheer scale of Grosvenor House, or the towering kitsch of the Hilton, the Intercon's defining characteristic has been its anonymity. Even the architecture of the building, its guests kept hidden behind a depressing concrete facade, suggested a hotel at pains to avoid the attentions of the outside world. And given the tired state of its interiors, altered over the years through a series of piecemeal refurbishments, maybe that was for the best.



Tellingly, until recently the Intercontinental did not even make a song and dance about its prestigious Number One Park Lane address. Only now, as a £60m refurbishment draws to a close, has the hotel been renamed 'The Intercontinental London Park Lane'. And its profile on the Park Lane hotel circuit looks set to rise in keeping with the status its new name suggests.

One name which seems certain to put the Intercontinental firmly on the map is that of Theo Randall. Randall was himself a relatively anonymous figure during his decade-long tenure as head chef at The River Cafe, where he seemed content to stay in the kitchens, letting owners Ruth Rogers and Rose Gray grab the limelight. That has changed with his arrival at The Intercontinental, where the hotel's signature restaurant now proudly bears his name above the door. With a couple of notable exceptions (step forward AA Gill), the reviews have been universal in their praise - Jay Rayner of The Observer said he had eaten his best meal of the year there. And unusually for a Park Lane hotel, the restaurant is busier in the evenings than the daytime. Its patrons are as likely to be Londoners as guests at the hotel, perhaps attracted by the fact that it is a lot easier to get a table here than at The River Cafe.



Another factor that should put an end to the corporate anonymity of the hotel is its new interior design scheme. Intercontinental's current focus is its global 'In the Know' marketing push - an initiative designed to establish the brand's "desire to immerse its guests in authentic and local destination experiences." Where Intercontinental was once a byword for international homogeneity, the intention is now to give the group's hotels a sense of place. At Park Lane, this has manifested itself in the employment of head concierge Corrado Bogni, formerly of One Aldwych, to give guests the inside track on London life. Moreover, the design scheme suggests at least some attempt to reference the hotel's

INTERCONTINENTAL PARK LANE

1 Park Lane, London
W1J 7QY
Tel: +44 (0)207 409 3131
www.ichotelsgroup.com

447 rooms, 60 suites
Theo Randall, Cookbook Cafe
Lobby Lounge
Elemis Spa
1300m2 Conference & Banqueting Facilities

Photography courtesy of ESP Business Development

location, whilst retaining its operators stringent brand standards.

To this end, one of the first sights greeting guests as they arrive at the hotel is a series of six illuminated sketches of London landmarks, drawn by local artist Alan Halliday, and converted into a frieze of travertine marble and amber glass by Artifex. This is just one of a series of striking features introduced by J2 Design, who were responsible for the interiors throughout the public areas of the hotel.

Yet many of the changes that have transformed the hotel are behind-the-scenes alterations and fundamental spatial changes that will go unnoticed by guests. The architectural practice for the refurbishment, which has left no corner of the Intercontinental untouched, was ReardonSmith.

Much of their work has involved opening up the building to the outside world, as Conrad Smith of ReardonSmith explains: "The usual task for hotel architects of optimising revenue generating opportunities for the operator has, in this case, been met by re-planning the ground floor and opening it up to harness the unique views over Hyde Park Corner."

New over-size windows with bombproof glazing have been introduced throughout the hotel ensuring guests can at last enjoy the views across the Park and towards Knightsbridge.

Inside, on the ground floor, the large lobby lounge was entirely stripped back to its structure. Only the original marble floor, since re-polished, remains.

By relocating the business centre, which had occupied prime space, to a more logical habitat on the mezzanine meeting room floor, an area was released for a new lounge bar overlooking Hyde Park with an intimate "snug" to the left hand side. These substantial structural changes have laid the foundations for J2 Design to then completely reinvent the space from scratch. "Previously, the lounge was broken up into sections that visually fought one another - a reflection of piecemeal refurbishments over the years," says Joshua Judd of J2 Design. "We were able, with ReardonSmith, to take a homogenous look at the space and so create a series of spaces that flow naturally."

The journey through these spaces begins in the reception area, which has been zoned into three comparatively intimate areas which provide a more welcoming experience for guests.

As well as the aforementioned backlit depictions on London landmarks, design highlights include stunning chandeliers, a curved concierge desk with a 'cracked-gesso' front and a weighty stone top and, opposite, a recessed guest relations area, the open layout of which has since become a brand standard for the InterContinental Group.

To the left of the reception, now re-organised to provide three separate check-in desks rather than one monolithic counter, is the bar area. The bar itself is a stunning piece in Belgian stone, complete with fossilised creatures, which has been water cut with a swirling pattern through which light shines, glowing towards reception. The rich colours of the bar make way for lighter tones in the lounge area towards the far end where an espresso bar has been introduced.

Beyond the newly-introduced casual seating areas to the right of the bar, guests then turn the corner to arrive at the Cookbook Cafe. Here, following a total strip-out, the floors have been levelled, a new ceiling introduced and the old servery that dominated the space removed to be replaced by small, moveable stations that can be adapted to meet the different demands on the space through the day.

With the exception of appropriately rustic-looking benches and tables,

the upholstery and other fittings are now contemporary and a smart new striped carpet design adds a splash of colour. The space is overlooked by a huge artwork mural developed from a photograph looking up through the trees of Hyde Park to the sky. Outside, through the newly enlarged windows, guests can glimpse the real thing.

Approaching the Theo Randall restaurant, a large inset glazed panel displaying a full-height wine rack and a shimmering corridor in backlit water glass mark the entrance to the restaurant. Inside, a six-metre long timber bar with a central panel, also in back-lit water glass, extends along one side, allows sitting space for guests to eat solo. Diners in the restaurant can catch movement from the kitchen through a letterbox slot in the back wall.

The emphasis on seasonal Italian and British food is reflected in the design. Natural materials are used but with a twist, such as timbers with metallic finishes, bronzed leather upholstery, a repeating "English grass" motif and leather on the floor. In what could otherwise have been a depressing corner of the restaurant, the architects and designers have also found space for a new private dining room which is entered through large specially designed sliding doors that combine layers of overlaid metal mesh encased in glass, offering both privacy and passing glimpses of the restaurant.

A separate kitchen serves the mezzanine level conference and banqueting facilities where 12 completely refurbished rooms feature masses of natural light and exceptional views. The ballroom has also been re-built to create what is surely the most contemporary and attractive interior environment of any banqueting space on Park Lane.

Even on the outside, the hotel now presents a more acceptable face thanks to its freshly cleaned facade, remodeled forecourts and newly lit bays.

Interestingly, this hotel is one of the few remaining properties where Intercontinental Hotels Group has chosen to retain its ownership of the building.

On Sleeper's visit the 447 guestrooms (designed by Ilana Feingold), and 60 suites, four of them individually-designed signature suites (by designers KCA), were still being completed, as was the Elemis Spa and Club Lounge, designed by RDD.

Once these are finished, will Intercontinental have finally created a hotel worthy of its prestigious address? Rob Shepherd, VP Operations for UK and Ireland certainly thinks so: "Our brand is highly respected throughout the world and this major programme of works, both front and back of house, will ensure that the London hotel sets the standard as the new flagship for the brand."

Words by Matt Turner