

LUXURY WITHOUT COMPROMISE

Robb Report

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Finding your place by design

Clint Nagata, founder and creative partner of Blink Design Group, charts a path forward for designers and creatives for the foreseeable future.

Illustration: Penn Ey, Chee

THE MORE I travel the world, the more convinced I become that a sense of place is everything. A deep dive into the culture, people, customs and architectural and design vernacular of a place is so crucial to what we do at Blink Design Group. It truly is the wellspring of inspiration and where it all begins. I like to call it ‘placemaking’.

Examples? Two recent projects come to mind. A deep dive into Vietnamese architectural and design traditions gave rise to some creative interpretations of the Bovi roof truss system and Gian Nha, a kind of compartmentalised home design of interconnected rooms and courtyards, as well as embracing traditional duck eggshell lacquerwork as features of the flagship Regent Phu Quoc. The second would be the Japanese concept of *daisugi*, or coppicing the Takagamine forest’s stunning cedar trees. This informed the motif that recurs throughout Roku Kyoto, our recent project for Hilton’s LXR Hotels and Resorts, a new luxury collection.

Although it’s always exciting to create something new, often our work is about conversions and renovations. The challenges are many but it always boils down to time and money. ‘Do more with less’, ‘build a Rolls-Royce on a Hyundai budget’ and ‘do it yesterday’.

As designers, we need to work smarter and come up with creative solutions that help to add hours in a day without tying ourselves to the desk or computer. The pandemic ushered in the era of ‘work from location’—a business model that allowed us to begin to expand our studio hours by sharing work across 12 time zones, stretching from the East Coast in the US to

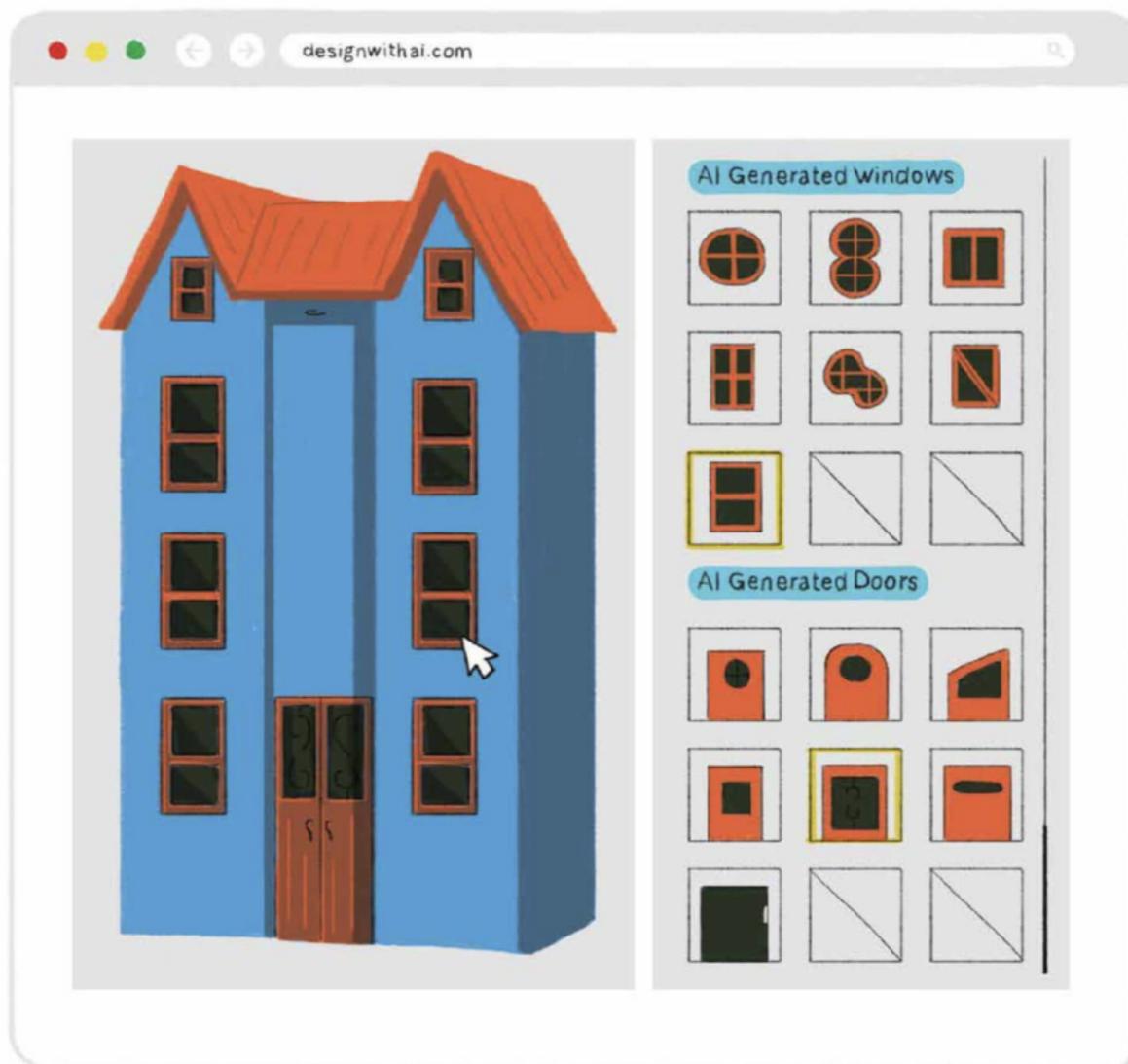
Lisbon. Productivity has soared; no mean feat when time is a priceless commodity.

Equally important is to be creative with ever-shrinking budgets. Resourcing local materials not only helps in creating a strong sense of place, but also helps avoiding the logistical nightmare of shipping costs and delays.

Upcycling is a big part of what we do. It’s the art of turning an ugly duckling into something new and fresh. When we converted Jumeirah Meradhoo into Raffles, we made a critical decision to paint the mismatched, stained millwork to a pale warm grey colour, which helped to transform the resort into a colonial tropical style aligned with the Raffles design DNA. This preserved the structure’s heritage and worked wonderfully.

Sustainability is an overused and abused term. Often it just gets lip service—a box to tick. True sustainability takes commitment, from owners and operators as well as designers and architects. We’ve seen small changes such as furniture suppliers who have invested in recycled materials in their furniture. Much more needs to be done.

In the post-pandemic era, there has been a mad rush for owners and operators to make up for lost time and opportunities. We see a lot of developers investing more heavily in brownfield projects that can easily be brought to market versus greenfield projects that take much longer. There has also been a significant increase in demand for branded residences, as the ability to work remotely allows many of us to indulge in a more appealing work-life balance.



New trends? I see a shift towards what I'd call purposeful travel. It's the journey as much as the destination. People want to experience things rather than just stay at a particular resort or hotel. This has only fuelled the need for hotels and resorts to be more authentically rooted in their locale.

Although the exponential leaps and bounds of artificial intelligence (AI) are exhilarating and terrifying, the ramifications for hospitality design are huge. While speaking at a recent event, I was asked about ChatGPT and whether it would replace hotel designers. It's a scary thought. Technology already exists that can plan out a basic three-star hotel room and create detailed specifications. I think the glass is half full—I see AI assisting and advancing design but not replacing the human element. Luxury needs intuition and

the human touch. Things come full circle. When I graduated from college, the western architectural community frowned upon firms that did not design modern buildings and instead embraced the past and a sense of place. All the large international hotel chains practised uniformity and wanted their hotel in Asia to look like it was in America. Fast forward to today and I'm glad all of this has changed. Placemaking has become an essential part of creating guest experiences that are more true to where they exist and what has gone before. Uniformity is dead and individuality is king.

What would I say to new designers? Embrace failure and think big. It's only by testing yourself and embracing the unknown that you can grow. Learn from what's gone before. The past is the future. Live by design. 📐