

super HOTELS

No longer satisfied with providing first-class hospitality, leading hotel brands are raising the bar with some bold new designs. By designing groundbreaking and iconic buildings with state-of-the-art facilities, architects are turning their hotels into attractions in their own right.

With customer expectations constantly challenged, it is no longer sufficient to offer five-star luxury, gourmet cuisine and the latest spas and technology. To stand out from an increasingly crowded marketplace, a hotel needs an 'edge' to secure its share of the market. For guests, it's about turning an overnight stay into an 'experience'.

The Far East is leading the field with landmark hotels such as the Grand Hyatt Shanghai in China. The hotel, located on the 53rd to 87th floors of the Jin Mao Tower, is the tallest in the world – not bad as a unique selling point.

The 555-bedroom hotel was designed by Chicago's Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP. Edward Tai, area vice president of Hyatt International Corporation, explains the attraction of mega hotels: 'This was the start of real international hotels in China, moving from five-star to five-star-plus, and it made a statement about what China was capable of. When we opened, people were just coming in to look because they couldn't believe there was such a hotel,' Tai explains. 'It was a wake-up call for China in terms of creativity and elegance.'



Architects are upping the ante with a new breed of mega hotels destined to become landmarks in their own right. **Rebecca Burgess** looks at the future of hotel design – and likes what she sees.



Tai believes mega hotels have an important role to play in terms of guests retaining a good impression. 'A luxurious hotel like this is a "show-off place"; it gives people an ability to show off themselves and instils confidence in the people they are dealing with.'

The creation of a hotel of such magnitude was awarded to the architects on the basis of their creation of the Grand Hyatt Hong Kong. While the design and construction was challenging, Tai stresses that a major influence on the design was a practical layout, particularly where elevators ran and staff rooms were located. 'Operationally, we are more concerned with the interior layout,' he says. 'We design from within. We do not just focus on the façade.' The hotel's success has earned it recognition as one of 2006's top 75 hotels in Asia in *Condé Nast Traveller* magazine.

On the other side of the world, Foster + Partners is designing the groundbreaking Aleph in Argentina – a mixed-use cultural and residential quarter in Buenos Aires. At its heart is the new Philippe Starck-designed Faena Hotel + Universe, on the waterfront of the Puerto Madero Este harbour. Converted from a grain warehouse, the Faena Hotel is constructed using imported Manchester bricks, with interiors in black marble and red velvet, and is a first for the country's hospitality industry.

The trend for 'mega' statements of design and luxury in first-class surroundings is taking a different direction in Europe, where magnitude on the scale of the Grand Hyatt Shanghai is more difficult to achieve in a costly labour market. Instead, European hotel developers are turning to iconic buildings and locations to stand out from the crowd. Rocco Forte's recently opened Hotel de Rome, which opened in Berlin last year, is a conversion of an 1889 building designed by architect Ludwig Heim, which until 1945 housed the Dresdner Bank.

Today, the original bank vault has been turned into a 20m swimming pool. Within its historic walls, designer Tommaso Ziffer has created a beautiful and unique interior. His design sympathetically integrates the old bank's more idiosyncratic features, and since opening last year, the hotel has been celebrated as a fusion of contemporary chic and old-world Teutonic grandeur.

So, whether it be a location in the tallest building in the world or a swimming pool in a bank vault, it seems guests are still hungry for mega hotels in the 21st century. ■

The Gehry-designed Marqués de Riscal (left) has injected a dash of drama into the world of hospitality, while the Grand Hyatt Shanghai (inset), the tallest hotel in the world, impresses with its sheer scale and stunning views.

Iberian dream: the Marqués de Riscal

In 2002 the Marqués de Riscal Winery commissioned the celebrated architect Frank Gehry to design a hotel for facilities in Elciego in La Rioja, the principal wine-growing region in Spain. Construction began in May 2003 and the hotel opened in July 2006.

The 43-room hotel is typical Gehry, resembling a bundle of giant ribbons left in the middle of the countryside. There is no doubt that the hotel building is architecturally significant, but the inside has fixtures, fittings and services to match. The hotel required an investment of €60 million to construct and fit it out to the required luxury standards.

'Guests have been waiting for the Marqués de Riscal to open for two to three years and have very high expectations of the Gehry architecture and Starwood luxury,' comments general manager Michel Nader.

'From meeting Gehry I have learnt a lot about design. There is still a gap between design and operation sometimes, in terms of maintenance and which materials are used, which means more manpower and more euros.'

'The hotel is unique in Europe in offering the best architecture, the best hotel, great wine, a vinotherapy spa and a Michelin-starred restaurant. It's a challenge, but it has made us the hot spot in Spain and set a trend for the future.'