

Ian Schrager, the legendary designer and hotelier, tells Bill Millard how he keeps his finger on the zeitgeist.

THE KING OF NEW YORK

Ian Schrager entered his office in an upbeat mood. Part of the reason for his high energy level became apparent when his mobile phone rang halfway through the conversation: it was his new wife, former ballerina Tania Wahlstedt. Post-workout adrenaline may have added to the post-honeymoon exhilaration. But a look around his work space made it clear that Schrager's intensity is habitual.

Schrager's own office features a long wall with photos, diagrams, floor plans, press clippings and other working documents. Some CEOs make personal museums of their offices, covering shelf space with trophies and walls with photos of themselves in eminent company. This room is a working space, not a monument to an ego but a place to get things done. Its occupant clearly spends a lot more time living in the present and the future than on Memory Lane.

No one with even the haziest knowledge of Schrager's colorful history would expect his office to feature prominent reminders of an abandoned project. As a tastemaker and zeitgeist-surfer who has transformed two entire industries, he is consistently identified with what's around the next bend, not what's been left behind. Yet a set of monuments sit across from his desk; not just one version but multiple iterations, positioned where his eyes can't help but land several times a day. Models of Manhattan's unbuilt Astor Place hotel remind Schrager of one revolution he didn't quite pull off.

With the shadow of September 11 darkening the New York hotel business, the project collapsed for a variety of reasons: timing, personalities and finances. The site ended up getting a conservative mirror-glass condo tower by Charles Gwathmey, lucrative for the landowner Cooper Union but largely unloved. Schrager's regret over the Astor Place hotel is palpable.

'I would love to have done that project,' he says. 'It was way ahead of its time.'

Asked about the design's site-specificity, however, and the chance that something like it might eventually be realised elsewhere, he brightens instantly.

'Sure!' he says. His reaction to the Astor Place experience is Schrager in a nutshell: intensely emotional, driven, improvisatory, and above all, resiliently optimistic.

Schrager's optimism is nothing like naiveté. He is well aware of the gap opening up between the crashing economy and the market for four-star destination hotels. But he views the transition from a derivative-fueled gilded age to a broadly accessible Apple/Ikea/Muji aesthetic as just another field of opportunity. He'd take on the challenge of redefining one- or two-star lodging in a New York minute.

'I love the idea! Who says that great style and great design have to be reserved for rich people?'

An instinct for the big rethink

Schrager has endured experiences that would drive many men into a cowed, cautious existence. His most famous early venture, the Studio 54 dance club, co-founded with University friend

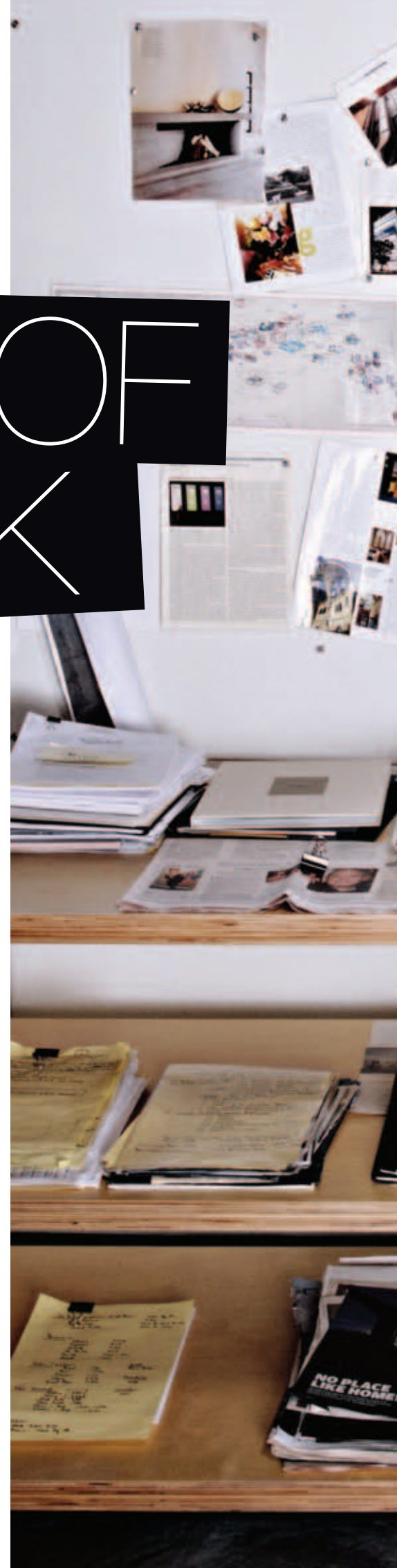




Photo by: Foto + Warner

Schragger relaxes at his New York City office.

Steve Rubell, imploded into a black hole of tabloid decadence and 13 months in federal prison. Schrager re-emerged in 1984 as a hotelier, converting a battered Madison Avenue property into the elegantly minimalist Morgans, the first in the series of specialty hotels that would fuse design excellence, art-world panache, and a canny business sense into a personal brand.

His empire would grow within and beyond New York to include the Royalton, the Hudson, the Paramount, the St. Moritz, Miami Beach's Delano, London's Sanderson, San Francisco's Clift, LA's Mondrian, and others. In 2005 he split with the Morgans Hotel Group and launched the Ian Schrager Company (ISC), acquiring and restoring the Gramercy Park Hotel – the flagship of Manhattan's 'haute bohemia' under the guidance of artist Julian Schnabel, whose own work joins that of Andy Warhol, Fernando Botero, Cy Twombly, Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Damien Hirst and Richard Prince on the walls. Schrager has also expanded into luxury residential development at 50 Gramercy Park North, a brightly lit apartment building by John Pawson and 40 Bond Street, incorporating Herzog & de Meuron's arresting cast-iron façade and graffiti-inspired aluminium gate.

THE STUDIO 54 DANCE CLUB, CO-FOUNDED WITH UNIVERSITY FRIEND STEVE RUBELL, IMPLoded INTO A BLACK HOLE OF TABLOID DECADENCE.

Attention to nuance remains an essential component of his knack for generating unique experiences. The nightclub work, he says, was 'critically important' in shaping his philosophy. 'First of all, we had no discernible product, so that honed my marketing skills,' he says. Any nightlife spot can provide drinks, music, a dance floor, and spaces to socialise, but Schrager contrived an atmosphere that competitors couldn't replicate.

'What you do to distinguish your product from other places is predicated on some kind of visceral experience, some kind of emotional connection that you make with a person.'

It's largely a matter of instinct, and Schrager has refined his gut reactions into an instrument that defies focus groups and value engineers.

'It's not so much about the colour of the night table or the sheet count; it's about the emotional connection you make – something that car companies, entertainment companies, and home builders realise. But for some reason we in the hotel industry were completely preoccupied with execution.'

He locates his work in the context of the hospitality industry's history, noting that as hotels have evolved from Roman precursors through various stages – the English roadside inn, EM Statler's variations on European luxury models, other American inventions such as the large convention hotel and the standardisation of Kermit Wilson's Holiday Inns – the hotel visit as a carefully integrated, almost theatrical experience has been a relatively late development.

'Up until the hotels we did the whole industry was conceived and directed toward previous generations. Morgans, in contrast, really was in response to my generation, and to what we responded to.'

The target population was a group Schrager terms 'discretionary travelers,' definable by sensibility rather than income or profession and relatively resistant to market fluctuations.

'To me, the discretionary traveler is any person that's exercising an independent judgment and is seeking out a unique experience.'

No one before Schrager (and, until his death in 1989, partner Rubell) had taken the business risk of discovering how many such travelers existed, but their hunch about the potential size of this cool-hunting crowd transformed the industry.

Can the unique be upscaled?

The hotels Schrager pioneered are anti-Trumps and anti-Marriotts, sometimes financially down-market 'cheap chic' and sometimes four-star, but consistently opposed to standardisation, always quirky and frequently headline-worthy. His latest headlines, however, involve a venture that some observers might consider contrarian, even a contradiction in terms: a partnership with the Marriott chain.

'I had the market to myself for about 25 years,' he says, but imitators eventually arose: Starwood's W Hotels and its offshoot One Hotels, San Francisco's Kimpton, Minneapolis-based Graves Hotels Resorts, and the exurban NYLO chain.

'It took much longer than normal, but finally everybody's taken note of it and rushing into that area. So it became less interesting for me when it's no longer the exception to the rule, but really more the rule. I thought, 'Well, it's something that we invented, so why don't we go with someone and try and do something on a really large scale that I've never done before?''

Schrager joined forces with Marriott International's CEO JW (Bill Marriott, Jr., in 2007, launching a project that combines Schrager's

creativity with Marriott's resources and management expertise. Edition Hotels will open in 2010 in select cities, including Chicago, Washington, Los Angeles, Miami's South Beach, Scottsdale (Arizona), Paris, Costa Rica, and Madrid.

The art of the catalyst

His move into long-term residential spaces represents a different revision of his approach.

'In a hotel, my personality and the personality of the designer go into it, and we're creating a finished product; we're creating a world that someone goes into. It's our idea, our ethos. In an apartment building, the world is supposed to be created by the inhabitant, so it's our job to create an envelope that will be receptive to that person's idea.'

Schrager accepts the need for a different mindset, one placing restraints on his provocateur tendencies, but he is upbeat about taking on challenges.

Neither an architect nor a designer himself (his professional training, in his pre-Studio 54 phase, was in law), Schrager has established a niche that one might define not so much as hotelier or developer but a facilitator of spatial and cultural transformations. Collaboration is his essential art form: his eye for talent is as acute as his ability to read the zigzags of the zeitgeist.

Dan Wood and Amale Andraos, principals of New York architecture firm Work AC, were at OMA during its collaboration with Schrager on Astor Place. From their account of the experience, it was almost irrelevant that the hotel was never built. Wood describes Schrager's collaborations as 'long-lasting, not just trendy,' and Schrager himself as 'a fantastically open person [who] set in to motion the year of collaboration between OMA and Herzog & de Meuron, the impacts of which are immeasurable.'

'Schrager catalysed an exchange of ideas between the Rotterdam radicals and the methodical Swiss that changed the way both firms operated., adds Andraos.

'That's what's great about him,' says Wood. 'He doesn't have any preconceptions. He doesn't say: "That can't be done." He's actually excited if it can't be done, because then he wants to do it.' ■