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## MID-TIER MOD SQUAD

Big-brand flags in this sector are borrowing a page from their boutique brethren to up their design ante. The goal: Stand out from the crowd and grab more market share.

BY MATTHEW HALL

**THERE ARE NOW** more than 700 Hilton Garden Inns (HGI) around the world. So, when the brand recently unveiled plans for a new set of six region-specific design prototypes for development targets across the globe, it served as a telling barometer of the higher design quotient that's becoming the norm in this once ho-hum sector.

The new HGI prototypes—all bearing a flower-inspired name—were created to help propel the brand's expansion. "Hilton Garden Inn is on a strong growth trajectory and expanding its global footprint to new countries each year," John Greenleaf, HGI's global head, told *Boutique Design* in an exclusive interview in the aftermath of the prototypes' unveiling. "To accommodate that global growth and to meet and exceed the needs of developers and guests, we are evolving our approach to prototypes."



1 Compact yet versatile, the retail space within Hilton Garden Inn's just-released "Magnolia" prototype can also be reconfigured into the brand's existing North American locales.



2 A variety of seating configurations, along with chairs and pillows sporting vibrant colors, help create an engaging environment ripe for interaction in the new Hilton Garden Inn prototype's lobby.

3 References to the Rocky Mountain region's gold-mining past are interwoven throughout the Hotel Indigo Denver Downtown, including a set of graphics on opposing walls in the check-in area.

Hilton has plenty of big-brand company in pursuing such growth for their mid-tier brands—and in using design to help accomplish that. First up is a drill-down into some specifics to help accomplish that. First up is a drill-down into some specifics to help accomplish that. First up is a drill-down into some specifics to help accomplish that.

**HILTON GARDEN INN NORTH AMERICAN PROTOTYPE**  
Dubbed "Magnolia," HGI's North American prototype—created by Hilton's in-house team, in collaboration with DLLeonardo Italia's DiStudio unit and FRCH Design Worldwide—includes such features as a modular, pod-style check-in area, bright white public spaces punctuated with colorful and flexible seating arrangements, updated F&B offerings, including a 24/7 retail space that will also

replace the Pavilion Pastry spaces in existing locations within the next few years) and a refreshed breakfast buffet centered around an open-display kitchen for cooked-to-order food, and guest rooms with nature-inspired designs and larger bathrooms.

Greenleaf says the modifications contained within the Magnolia prototype were born out of feedback that the hotelier's in-house team, DiStudio and FRCH gathered over an 18-month period from developers, owners, hotel staffs and guests. In addition to offering a refreshed, more flexible interior environment, Hilton officials say that process resulted in two major benefits for owners/developers utilizing the Magnolia concept: a building footprint that's 8 percent smaller than its predecessor, and a corresponding 6 percent reduction in construction costs.

Greenleaf says the prototype's smaller footprint was achieved "primarily by removing the cupola and pushing the Pavilion under the room tower. The result is a design that makes it easier for hotel owners to acquire land and building sites for HGI locales."

Those factors, in turn, mean the Magnolia look should blossom into a stronger return on investment for owners, Greenleaf notes.

**HOTEL INDIGO DENVER DOWNTOWN**  
Mark Zeff, founder of interdisciplinary architecture/design firm MARKZEFF, has created several hotels for Hilton's fast-growing Canopy brand in recent years, and expects to do another in the Union Tower West mixed-use development in Denver's Lo-Do district. But when plans changed and the Canopy was replaced with a Hotel Indigo, Zeff says he was delighted by building architect John Pottman & Associates' invitation to stay on board to design what would be his firm's first-ever project for that HGI brand.

The resulting site-key hotel bears Zeff's signature exuberant style. That's perhaps best illustrated by both the high-ceilinged vestibule that serves as the entry for the property's Hearth & Drum restaurant, and that dining environment itself. "The vestibule is a huge circular space that's clad in wood and has the look



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4 Designer Mark Zeff's vision for Hearth & Drum, the new Indigo's in-house restaurant, includes a warm color palette to help offset the space's 20-ft. ceilings.

5 The guest rooms' walls at the Cambria Hotels & Suites in El Segundo feature a variety of stylized visual references to the property's SoCal setting.

6 Puccini Group designers sweetened the Cambria hotel's public areas with eye candy underfoot, in the form of patterned carpets, and overhead, with a series of hanging geometric light fixtures.

of walking through an oversized wine barrel," he explains. "This sets the stage for letting guests know that the restaurant is not going to be your typical dining environment."

Serving as the vestibule's centerpiece is a commission-starting sculpture titled "Wildwood Conesong Survival," by local artist Norman Egg, which juxtaposes a black-cherry tree trunk with steel elements. "The piece speaks to the surrounding Colorado Rockies, while still harmonizing with the hotel's clean and contemporary design," says Zeff.

Once inside the restaurant, Zeff sought to wow patrons with such elements as 20-ft-tall, floor-to-ceiling windows and an open kitchen with a motorized bar. "We also placed the tables well apart from one another and have banquettes that line the long walls," he says. "That makes the space feel just a little more formal—it's more of a bistro with a twist."

The restaurant is populated with artifacts and graphic representations of the Mile High City's mining-related past, a motif that is also found throughout the rest of the hotel's interiors. Its public spaces and guest rooms, for example, feature murals depicting archival images of such things as gold miners, surrounding landscapes and map plots. In a similar vein (pun intended), the guest rooms are home to polished concrete ceilings and columns. "This was a reference to a bygone era that decidedly was not here," says Zeff. "In addition, the concrete lends itself to a modern yet organic feel."

**CAMBRIA HOTELS & SUITES IN EL SEGUNDO NEAR LAX**

Airports near hotels are often hand refuges for delayed passengers or short-stay travelers. To help the so-key Cambria El Segundo LAX rise above that not-so-inspiring standard, designers at Puccini Group worked to create a vibe that's so very SoCal within the hotel.

"To accomplish that, we interwove mid-century modern accents and vibrant artwork that give the hotel a unique personality reminiscent of 1950s Los Angeles, with a lobby and pub lounge that encourage guests to experience the lively yet laid-back culture of the area," says Douglas Fu, senior designer and project manager, Puccini Group.



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Further reinforcing that local flavor are visual references to sunsets over the Pacific Ocean and LA's set of skyscrapers in both the public spaces and guest rooms of the hotel, which is housed in a building designed by architecture firm Leo A Daly. "Throughout the hotel, guests encounter warm pops of color inspired by SoCal sunsets, along with a curated selection of vivid and vibrant art that depict the city's skyline in an abstract way," says Puccini designer Jocelyn Ramos.

The Choice Hotels property's proximity to LAX also receives nods in the design. For example, the entry experience includes a curved front desk made of precast concrete that's paired with pendant lights inspired by aviation maps.

The guest rooms, meantime, are laid out with separate sleeping and relaxation areas, and populated with such amenities as platform beds, loungers and spa-like baths. "Each room also features a graphic wall which serves as the focal point and base from which the room's colors were pulled," says Fu. "By balancing the graphic walls and playful artwork with clean-line furniture, we were able to achieve a youthful and fun aesthetic in the rooms that's designed to appeal to the hotel's target market of 'modern pioneers.'"

**HOTEL JAL CITY HANEDA TOKYO WEST WING**

This is another hotel seeking to make its proximity to an airport a plus rather than a minus. Located a 10-minute drive from Japan's Haneda Airport, this site-key hotel was built with an eye toward accommodating the upcoming deluge of visitors expected for the 2020 Olympics and Paralympics in and around the Japanese capital.

Winning a design competition to create the interiors for the Hotel JAL City Haneda Tokyo West Wing was Gensler's Tokyo office, whose team created a design concept titled "J-SELECT" for it. "The letter 'J' stands for both Japan and the Hotel JAL City brand, and the design theme symbolizes the unique local touches we chose to use throughout the space," says Rie Kurokawa, Gensler associate and interior designer.

"That starts in the lobby of the property, in the form of a tiled floor bearing a set of lines that represent the airport's runways. "Those graphics also double as a wayfinding system that immediately engages visitors," says Kurokawa.

Subdividing the hotel's public spaces is a series of walls with angled



7 The old and the new intermingle in the lobby of the Hotel JAL City Haneda, with a floor graphic of the nearby airport's runways and walls inspired by Tokyo's traditional alleyways.

8 The guest rooms at the Gensler-designed hotel feature signature red accents, similar to those found throughout the property, and headboard walls bearing large-scale prints of nearby scenes.

shelving that Kurokawa says was inspired by the traditional alleyways still found in parts of Tokyo. Other visual elements representing cultural touchstones include liberal doses of stucco and rice paper. Serving as a modern counterpoint to those elements are red accents on furniture and signage.

Guest rooms continue the cultural-immersion experience, thanks to such features as carpets bearing traditional Japanese motifs, bedding made from folk textiles and large-scale prints of nearby landscapes and cityscapes on the headboard walls. The result, the designer says, is a hotel that "provides travelers with a truly one-of-a-kind stay by celebrating Japanese culture."

As this quartet of case studies clearly shows, the move by more and more mid-tier brands to establish statement-making visual identities for their locales has made this sector the scene of lots of creative action within the hotel industry—and that, in turn, should serve as a source of celebration for designers seeking to work in it. ■