




Public
#4
21st
Century
Guide
to
Life



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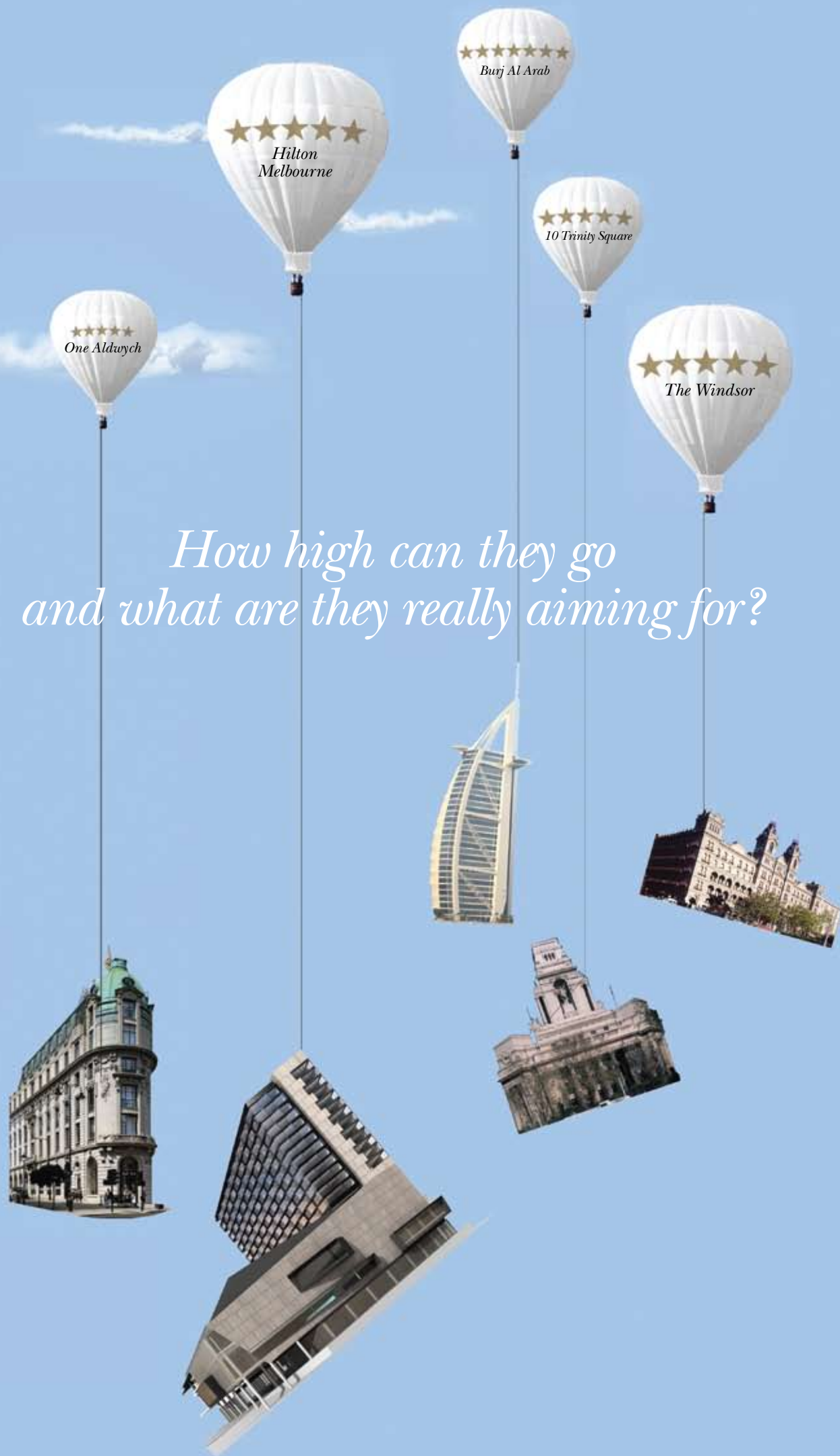


STAR INFLATION

by Rob Steul

Remember when everyone knew that the best hotels were rated five-star? It was a time when hotels were judged independently and awarded stars based on facilities, quality and service. This worked well in an age of commonality based on widely accepted criteria, for a while anyway. But these stars often missed rating the most important of qualities—the ‘Guest Experience’.

More recently we have witnessed the inevitable creeping inflation of star ratings. The six-star came first, and then new claims of yet another ultimate, the seven-star hotel, launched with great media coverage and hype. What comes next, eight, nine, or even twelve stars? What does all this mean for hoteliers, owners, designers and most importantly, our collective guests?



★★★★★
One Aldwych

★★★★★
*Hilton
Melbourne*

★★★★★
Burj Al Arab

★★★★★
10 Trinity Square

★★★★★
The Windsor

*How high can they go
and what are they really aiming for?*

In many ways, this rise in defining hotel quality has acknowledged great advances in creativity in how hotels and resorts are designed, built and operated. But all too often it can be misleading, especially if self proclaimed for promotional gain. So, is this inflation simply self indulgence on a corporate or a national scale, or a bona fide change in the way hotels are delivering their promise?

Perhaps the six, or even seven, star hotel can be explained on a relative scale, a realisation that an exceptional effort and achievement of a building can elevate it beyond the current highest standard. The much talked about Burj al Arab Hotel in Dubai for example exceeded most other hotels in terms of cost per room, scale, luxury fitout and service, and could not accept being evaluated with established criteria. Yet, the advent of the new six and seven star ratings challenges the long established relative positions held among the top world hotels and can be contentious, especially as it seems to focus on bricks and mortar rather than on the service and guest experience. As Gordon Campbell Gray, a leading London based hotelier, says, "To say you are six or seven star, says that you believe you are better than the world's best hotels ... better than Claridges, the George V, the Peninsula ... that is a very big statement".

Surely the rating of a hotel cannot be purely established on the quantity of money spent building an iconic shape, or the square metres of marble lining the interiors. It must be about the quality of the guest experience, the feeling of being in the right place, living up to the lifestyle aspirations of the guest. This is a far more elusive factor in hotel evaluation and one which has not been at the heart of the previous rating system.

The question of what constitutes a top-rated hotel is hard to pin down in an age of greater provision of opulence and extravagance. Luxury is certainly not just about the physical appointments, or even the quality of services provided, but is most about the qualities of the all important guest experience. Harder to quantify, and quite personal to the guest, this 'X factor' is what really makes a great hotel.

Our need to rate and compare

Our globalised, market-driven economy seems consumed with the need to rate virtually everything. This tends to breed increasing competition for attention between all manner of products and services to be better than the rest, diminishing the value of ratings themselves. How often these terms are used to identify everyday products in our lives! We now have luxury butter, five-star fridge/freezers and premium sun-cream. This marketing free-for-all is surely diluting the meaning of these definitive words, and begs the question—who the heck are they who rate these things anyway?



One-star
*Tourist level;
practical accommodation;
small rooms, limited services*



Two-star
*Limited service, but larger
rooms and more facilities such
as ensuite and in-room TV*



Three-star
*Larger establishments with
more formal levels of service;
laundry service available;
room service of breakfast only*

Who they are

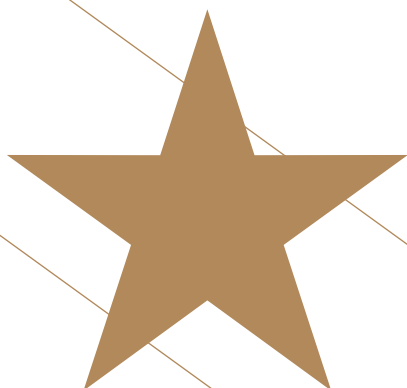
In some countries, for example Spain and France, there is an official body with standard criteria for classifying hotels which is almost scientific. It has become an exercise in checking boxes. For instance a bathroom without five fixtures (a shower, a bathtub, a toilet and two wash basins) cannot be five-star. But in other countries there are no official standards, leaving the hotels to establish their own rankings—the shortcomings of this are obvious. There have been attempts at unifying classification systems so that they become one internationally recognised and reliable standard, but this has only achieved limited success regionally, such as in Europe and North America. And regardless, there are often great differences between quality and level of accommodation at the same star rating between countries, and even within countries.

Besides which, none of these criteria seems to tell us much about what the hotel is actually like, how it will feel for the guests to stay there, how it will engage their senses and provide a memorable experience. Some other way of quantifying these crucial aspects is needed.

The new ratings

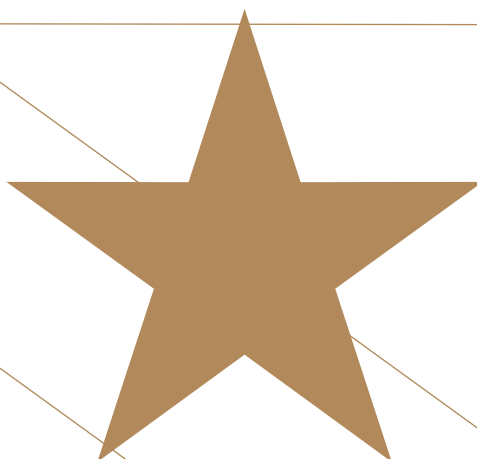
In an age of connectivity, traditional ratings are being challenged. Cable TV travel programmes, design and travel books, and most influential, an array of internet websites allow consumers to precisely filter for particular interests. These sites, such as www.designhotels.com and www.hiphotels.com, with their associated publications, allow guests to read evaluations from people he or she relate to and trust. People using these books and websites know that the evaluators share their own interests and criteria. Other new authorities are internet booking sites, many of which allow guests to rate their own experiences. This allows a much more democratic approach to rating hotels and they tend to be much closer to defining the real guest experience.

All of this reinforces the fact that there is not one viable rating system. It is as if there are two separate worlds, one where traditional hotel values are rated 1–5 stars, and the other where a new and different crop of hotels and resorts are vying for attention on the world stage communicating their offer through websites, media and advertising—all contributing to star inflation.



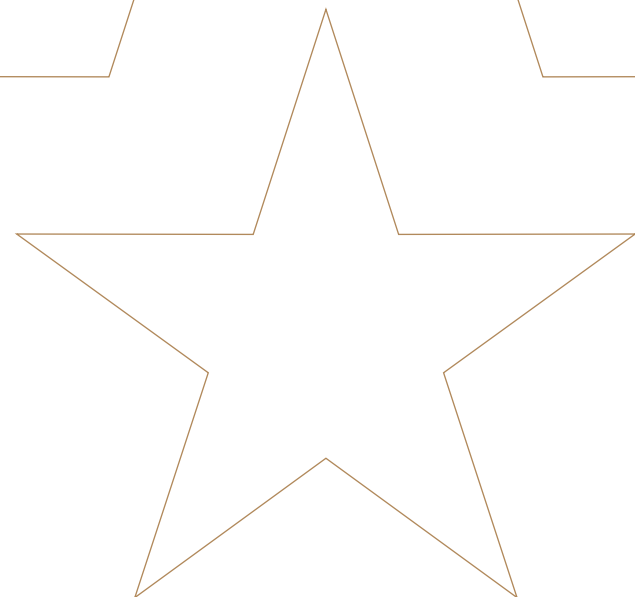
Four-star

*Superior comfort;
all bedrooms with ensuite
(bath, fitted shower and toilet);
more spacious rooms
and luxurious public areas;
well trained staff; emphasis on food
and beverage and service;
twenty-four hour room service;
dry cleaning service available*



Five-star

*Highest international standard quality
in accommodation, facilities, services
and cuisine; striking accommodation
throughout (first mention of design);
well cared for by professional staff
providing flawless guest services*



Beyond Five-star?

Where is this coming from?

To answer this we must look at our global, mobile society for the answer, and it is on a planetary scale. Global transport has become very accessible, opening up the most remote corners of the world to super luxury. There really are almost no destination surprises left, with global competition for tourist dollars fierce. The result is 'destination competition', with cities, regions and even whole nations vying for a greater piece of the global tourist pie, shamelessly self promoting their wares. We have seen whole new tourist locations open up in recent years, fuelled by the shift of global wealth and with their story told by media, hype and all. The worldwide marketing machine of the global economy has misguidedly linked the concept of luxury and unique travel experiences with the high octane world of internet speed, high fashion, air-brushed celebrity and the quest for the super-natural body, resulting in a sort of architectural equivalent of unattainable, extreme perfection.

The response by many designers to address operators' and owners' needs to be heard above this cacophony has sparked the advent of 'celebrity buildings'. Many misinterpret the ideas of luxury, service and an authentic guest experience and simply try to stand out by designing ever-increasingly elaborate forms and iconic shapes.

The quest to outdo one another has resulted in the ironic situation where quality of the guest experience is actually being driven down, while star rating numbers increase. Therefore, do we really need the old star system anymore?

Navigate by the stars, or be guided by the experience?

As we have seen, the old system of star ratings was based on a rather formal, and fairly dull, set of criteria on a checklist. As familiarity of international hotel brands has bred confidence in quality levels and services provided, the once important items are taken for granted now. For example we all know from experience that the Marriott in Hong Kong will have the same quality towels as one in London or New York. There will be a terry cloth robe hanging on the back of the bathroom door, a hairdryer will be provided, etc. Reassurance of the brand and brand standards meets expectations, making guests feel safe and secure in their choice of hotel.

What now is becoming far more important is the guest experience. What is the place like, how will a guest feel, what are the unique aspects of the hotel which make it a genuine experience authentic to its context and location?

Rating this experience is more difficult, maybe impossible, as it is about far more subjective judgement. The first major signs of this new experiential based valuation of hotels came with the rise of the 'boutique' hotel. These hotels were fuelled by the desire of people to have a more intimate, personal experience at a scale which was more unique and special. The ratings and standards of the past, while driving up the overall basic quality, had resulted in hotels becoming very similar, almost banal. This resulted in a mutiny of sorts with demand from the public that hotels become neighbourhood scale again, where one could feel at home and integrate with the local culture during their stay.

Guests were looking for a genuine experience, looking for individuality and the exotic and, most importantly for designers and operators alike, were using their choice of hotel as an expression of their own lifestyle aspirations, about how staying there made them feel.

It was coverage in the media about that return to the unique, the special, and the intimate which drove the success of these hotels rather than dependence on hotel brand positioning or star rating. Many of these hotels have been very successful and blend a modern, stylish physical design with the personalised service and intimate scale of the traditional five-star hotel formerly found only in the world's finest capital cities. For example, Campbell Gray's approach in his hotels is to not overuse the word luxury, but rather "change it to quality", concentrating on his guest's experience in his hotel, providing a refuge of good taste, comfort and calm. These boutiques redefined a more traditional approach to star ratings backed up by the reputation of the hotelier.

The danger is that the success of these types of hotels lives and dies depending on individual hoteliers such as Campbell Gray, not on brand standards and manuals. Most problematic, the word 'boutique' has now been hijacked by those using it merely as a marketing gimmick and, like the star ratings before it, its meaning has been devalued.

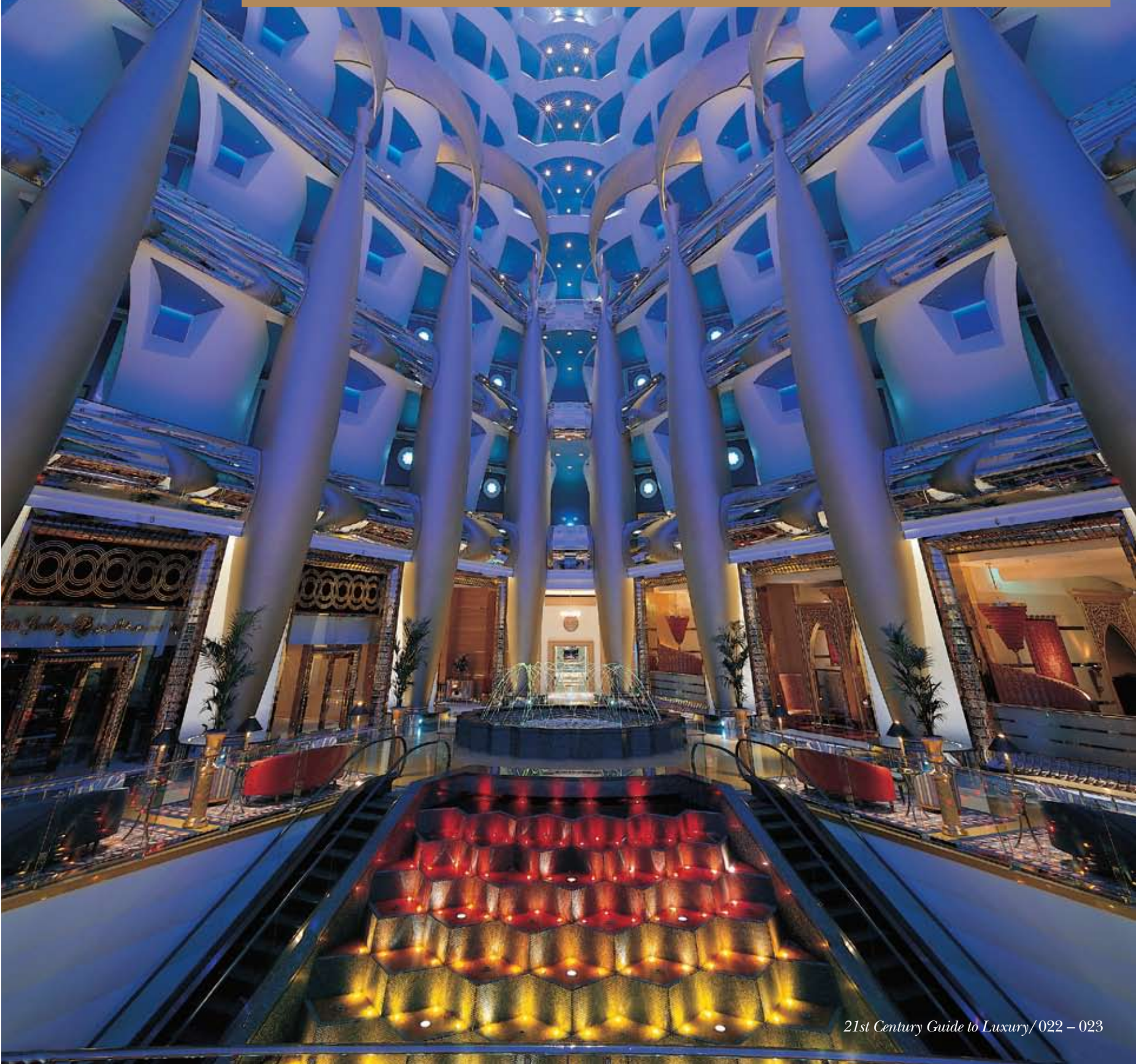
Is it time for a new system?

*Stars used to define the luxurious,
now they should express the experiential.*

Market research

In 2007 Woods Bagot conducted a survey to understand what customers in the UK were looking for in hotels. The poll of 5000 consumers showed that sixty-five per cent of respondents aged 35–54 were less likely to place trust in a star rating when choosing their hotel for work or leisure and more likely to look to the internet for independent reviews from their peers. Remarkably, the results marked a turn away from commonly held views that younger people are more likely to source information from the net, with 18–35 year-olds actually showing a preference for relying on star ratings over online reviews. What this seems to suggest is that travellers with more experience have recognised the massive inconsistencies in the star rating system across Europe and the world. Once you've stayed at a hotel that is both inferior and more expensive than a previous hotel at the same rating, you lose faith in the rating's ability to assure quality.

The research also found that fifty-five per cent of people were looking for unique accommodation and were fed up with staying in the mass market, chain hotels currently on offer. The majority of young consumers aged 18–35 saw the most viable type of hotel for the future to be the 'global boutique brand', which offers the security of a named brand but also offers the more individual travel experience that modern consumers demand. This is reflective of the up and coming generation which is constantly accruing spending power. They are looking to spend leisure and work time in hotels that afford the complete security of a trusted brand with an experience that is anything but standardised and mass market.





Simple but exquisite. One Aldwych, London. Reproduced with permission

A focus on a creative, collaborative approach to hotel design is crucial to advancing hotel quality and enhancing the guest experience without resorting to the hype of star inflation.

Big Bang Theory

We have established that the measuring criteria and meaning of stars has changed dramatically, that quality of hotels should be about the experience of the place rather than simply excessive luxury, and that the individual hotelier, designer and guest all contribute to a hotel's success.

A focus on a creative, collaborative approach to hotel design is crucial to advancing hotel quality and enhancing the guest experience without resorting to the hype of star inflation.

As designers, we approach our projects not only as architects, but as co-creators in collaboration with the hotelier, essentially designing the guest experience not just the building. In our projects, we strive to understand the context of the site, the local culture, architectural vernacular, the hotelier's aspirations and the guest's needs, to create a unique property which exceeds expectations and delivers an authentic experience unique to location. In this way, we unlock great value in the site and enhance the capital value of the building by helping the operator achieve their aspirations. This is something that has real selling power, not a self serving sign on the door proclaiming it to be a six or seven-star property.

This approach requires each of the parties in the design process to be very open with each other and treat each other as valued partners in the creative process. It is a coming together of very different groups (operators, owners, architects and designers) traditionally not always having the best reputation for working well together.

The process we employ in every hotel project includes working through various hypothetical guest experiences and modelling those with the operator. For example, in our 10 Trinity Square project in the City of London, we have explored various arrival sequences starting from touch down at the airport right through to entering the guest room itself. We examined the various guest profiles of those who would frequent the hotel. For example, we looked at the all important, frequent returning guest needing a sense of home (think country pile not city building); the first time tourist wishing to taste the essence of London; and the city banker, wanting seamless, flexible service in elegant, but not oppressively opulent, surroundings.

Each of these guests' wants and needs are different; it is our job to provide for these various scenarios. Hal Thannisch, Executive Vice President for the owner/operator of 10 Trinity Square, Thomas Enterprises, states, "Our desire is that each project expresses its own individuality and provides authentic experiences for guests".

In creating One Aldwych in London, Campbell Gray and designer Mary Fox Linton created some breathtakingly simple core values for defining the hotel. He understood his guests first and created the building and operation around them. He states that "one cannot simply build more than a four-star hotel, the rest must be service, service and service". His strong belief that the "intelligent guest" is actually offended by waste, and looks at excess relating to luxury as being very old fashioned, has been central in his approach to the design and operation of the property. The result is that One Aldwych is at once traditional but comfortably modern, classic yet very stylish, relaxed yet reassuringly formal. Campbell Gray says the way forward is "concentrating on less, and making it exquisite." With this thoughtful confidence, One Aldwych is proudly five-star and does not join in on the hype of star inflation.

This approach is infinitely different from the tendency of many new hotel projects to go over the top on luxury, often appearing as tacky and wasteful, while hiding behind an invented star rating.

Being a part of this level of interaction with the hotelier, allows architects to respond to high operational aspirations with inventive designs which support them. We treat all projects as an opportunity to create a unique and memorable guest experience. Fitting out luxury appointments is the easy part, it is much more challenging to bring to life the spirit of a hotel and create a timeless design which quietly and confidently stands out in a noisy crowd. The future lies in authenticity, honesty and soul, not in gold plated taps, or self assessed stars. In a world filled with so much choice, yet layered with commonality, it is the only way.

What is Public?

Public is the global research brand of Woods Bagot.

It was established to bring a formal focus to our applied and theoretical research. Research that underpins our approach and sets benchmarks for the three market sectors we specialise in - Lifestyle, Education and Science and Workplace.

It is the role of Public to capture new thinking and act as a platform for clients, staff and collaborators to feed ideas and challenge conventional theory.

Created by our staff and disseminated through published research papers, seminars and projects, Public is the continuous dialogue on the issues that affect the built environment, our clients, our communities and the world we live in.

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Nik Karalis

