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Olga Polizzi



Reflecting on staying ahead of the game and developing stories for new hotel projects in Europe and Asia, the director of design at Rocco Forte Hotels talks to **Neena Dhillon**

When we started out, we were the leaders in terms of creating our hotels around a sense of place but everyone catches up," observes Olga Polizzi. "So that's the challenge, to keep a step ahead, and ensure you never repeat the same thing twice. Of course, everybody's into design today so it takes a lot to really surprise people and give them something different."

It's been more than 20 years since siblings Rocco Forte and Olga Polizzi began developing their collection of high-end hotels, now comprising 12 personality-infused, landmark properties across Europe. In addition to her own two UK hotels, Polizzi is constantly redoing rooms or adding spaces in existing Rocco Forte destinations as well as overseeing designers on larger projects and new openings as part of her role as director of design. She likens it to being on a roundabout – "I'm sure I've done more hotel bedrooms than anyone else" – but with her tightknit team of just four in London, she remains the creative force of the family-run company.

Polizzi's team sources new materials, textures, colours and effects from "rubber flooring options to wonderful engineered woods, the latest panelling to rubs and stains," and she is plugged into returning fashions: "Who would have thought encaustic tiles would be back in fashion? They're very much back in vogue."

Olga Polizzi is director of design for Rocco Forte Hotels and also owns two of her own hotels



Polizzi worked closely with architect and designer Tommaso Ziffer (right) on Hotel de la Ville in Rome

A pair of perfectionists

Then there are the digital technologies that have been put to surprisingly effective use at Hotel de la Ville, the family's second Roman property, which opened in an enviable location atop the Spanish Steps this May. On her choice of charismatic Italian architect and designer Tommaso Ziffer, with whom she worked previously on Rome's Hotel de Russie and Berlin's Hotel de Rome, Polizzi says: "It's a long-held relationship. Tommaso is clever and thinks things through. He taps into history yet comes up with something new. We can comfortably disagree and equally persuade each other. He's one of those few people who understand how to draw up hotel layouts. It's amazing how many basic layouts we have to do for designers when it comes to space planning bathrooms, for example. That just doesn't happen with Tommaso. He gets very upset when things aren't right."

Polizzi affectionately calls him neurotic but you get the sense the designers recognise the perfectionist in each other. It drives her equally bonkers when she walks into a mess of a room, a space where floor lamps or bedside tables aren't quite in the correct spot. For his part, Ziffer describes Polizzi as "adorable, well-mannered, exceptionally knowledgeable – and the soul of the company. She stays long after everyone has gone, moving around furniture until the proportions of a space are right. Sometimes she's the client, sometimes she's the project designer."

However the dynamic operates, it clearly works for the duo. At the outset of the Hotel de la Ville project, they agreed they needed a concept that would differentiate it from its more formal sister property, de Russie. An avid historian and couture aficionado, Ziffer suggested tapping into the role that Rome



The Canova Suite, one of the hotel's top suites, features an outdoor terrace with views across the city

“On Via Sistina, everything breathes history.
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TOMMASO ZIFFER



played during the era of the ‘Grand Tour’ in the 18th century – years in which English noblemen travelled to European cities to learn about art, culture, architecture, literature and good living. In this way, they could harness the idea of cultural exchange, paying homage to the hotel’s address on Via Sistina, which once would have been home to artisan workshops and abodes housing such young travelling nobles. Polizzi loved the initial thought and together they have developed the distinctive idea, finding ways in which colours and technologies could be interwoven to give the hotel a contemporary feel.

Breaking the rules

“When you’re in this location, everything breathes history,” says Ziffer. “At the same time, I wanted to reflect the modern hunger for the fantastical, all things culturally rich – just think about the shape of sleeves in fashion at the moment. So we have created this slightly wild decorative atmosphere here, still very much rooted in a classical vocabulary yet breaking the rules.”

There’s a playful extravagance to the layering of patterns, treatments, textures and luscious colour combinations that weave their way around public spaces. Digitally printed wall coverings from Zardi & Zardi are based on scans of old tapestries, with exuberant brocade and damask fabrics from Dedar and Rubelli adorning banquettes and walls, while ‘antiquated’ chairs are finished with neo-classical architectural details such as ‘lion legs’. In addition to precision-cut wall coverings,



digitally printed mosaics lend interest to tabletops and 3D scanning has been employed for plaster reproductions of decorative statuary. Mouldings and friezes speak of a classical age but again are very modern copies. Ziffer and his team had a blast researching the libraries and archives of Italy's monuments to identify prints and forms of antiquity.

In place of a concierge desk, he has substituted a marble trapezophorus block while geometric motifs represent a strong unifying thread. Black and white terracotta flooring from Fornace Sugaroni pays homage to the English chequerboard pattern typical of 18th-century noble houses but Ziffer's pièce-de-résistance is undoubtedly the Print Room, a symphony of Georgian yellow onto which digital reproductions of art have been printed. It is a play on the drawing rooms that would have been hung with display arrangements of Italian prints and tapestries collected during 'grand tours' once journeying nobles returned home. Ziffer speaks fondly of his design vision as "poetic chaos" and remains amused about the way in which modern technology has been used to resurrect happenings some 300 years ago.

Neither Ziffer nor Polizzi are particular fans of lighting consultants so they didn't engage one for Hotel de la Ville. "They tend to overdo it so you end up stripping out much of what they've suggested," Polizzi points out. "Lighting is so hit and miss but when it comes to hotels, you need to focus on what's really necessary, usually a mix of uplighters and downlights, floor lamps, wall sconces and central fixtures." One big nightmare on the project came from trying to fit the streamlined bronze versions of Empire chandeliers and other classically shaped lighting fixtures with contemporary dimming capabilities. The varying levels of the hotel – which is in fact formed of two buildings from different centuries – also proved a challenge. Polizzi is a stickler for proportions so she tends to raise ceilings, open windows and square off rooms where possible but often historic layouts throw up extra headaches in terms of getting proportional balance right. One of the items on their joint snagging list is the unevenness of flooring in some places, which was rushed in the renovation process.



The design of the Da Sistina restaurant was inspired by traditional Roman trattoria

Balancing forces

For Polizzi, finding designers to work with can be tough because she has been disappointed in the past when trying out new firms. That is why she tends to return to trusted partners on bigger projects. "It's like gold dust when you work with someone who knows what you want and who notices the same level of detail." In 2020, Rocco Forte Hotels is scheduled to debut in China and open another Italian property, Villa Igia in Palermo, following extensive renovation. Here, she has selected the highly respected Paolo Moschino of Nicholas Haslam to revive the city's grande dame, a turn-of-the-century Sicilian landmark that demands "very careful handling – we can't be overtly contemporary and will need to balance the design with something more romantic and soft."

Polizzi is also enjoying working alongside two female project managers in Palermo who are proving tough enough to handle the difficult transformation of the villa. She has observed the rise of women not just in design but also development and construction: "I'm one of those people who think these things



The hotel features two restaurants and two bars, including the Julep Herbal & Vermouth Bar (pictured)



Hotel de la Ville has 104 rooms and suites, inspired by Rome's role in the era of the Grand Tour

happen naturally over time. When women want to get to the top, they have the determination and ability to get there. Yet at the same time, despite what might be said, it's less true that men take on their fair share of children and housework so sometimes women get to a certain position in business and decide, for the sake of a balanced life, not to progress any further." She adds: "I do prefer working with women because they tend to listen, respect other opinions and take things onboard. Men, on the other hand, can get on their high horse."

She is a pessimist by nature, her own worst critic. "Sometimes you'll get positive feedback and, for a moment, you can take satisfaction at the job, but overall I'm a pessimist," she admits. "My brother is the optimist so I often wish I could be more like him, and he more like me." But perhaps that is the key to the successful brother and sister pairing – they are in fact two sides of the same coin. Dual forces that drive their business forwards – now a family concern that spans two generations. Still, there's satisfaction to be had in the correspondence received from

guests who are interested in the supplier of a certain object, or the colour that Polizzi has chosen for a wall. Current design trends are for swathes of colour and pattern and Polizzi is an admirer of Mexican architect Barragán's pioneering approach. Given a hypothetical break from hotel design, I ask, what would she love to do instead? "I love gardening and my own in Sussex is quite architectural with some wilder, more overblown English areas," she says. "The neatness and structure of garden design really appeals. It would also be a dream to take four walking holidays a year. And I love time at the opera."

So, there you have it. Should Polizzi ever take a sabbatical, offers for landscape projects or opera sets would surely be considered with interest. In the meantime, though, Rocco Forte Hotels remains on a steadfast expansion course and that means more design stories, more layouts, more rooms, more craftspeople and more materials to find.

The roundabout is calling and, with Polizzi at the design helm, staying ahead of the curve is a sure thing. ●



Olga Polizzi went to Rome Art School before joining the design department at Forte Hotels