

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

THE INTERNATIONAL DESIGN AUTHORITY

AUGUST 2016

## ANDERSON COOPER'S BRAZILIAN PARADISE

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'Iceberg' roses bloom beneath magnolia trees at the Ritz Paris, freshly renovated by architect Thierry Despont; the landscaping is by Jean Mus.

## BEAUTY TREATMENT

Paris's beloved Ritz just got a \$450 million makeover—but architect Thierry Despont's masterful work is so exacting you might not even notice

**B**ack in 2011 Mohamed Al Fayed announced his plan to renovate the Ritz Paris—the jewel in the swashbuckling Egyptian billionaire's crown—and he minced no words expressing precisely what he expected. "I want the Ritz to remain the best hotel in the world!" he told Thierry Despont, the architect-designer hired to revamp the urban palace, which opened its gilt-iron gates in 1898. "If you mess up," Al Fayed warned, "I'll kill you." Friends and clients told the dapper Despont much the same thing. Thus, the architect jokes, "I bought some land in Patagonia in case I needed to disappear!"

From Claridge's in London to the Statue of Liberty, highly scrutinized rehabilitations are par for the course for Manhattan's Despont. Hence the Ritz's supremely subtle \$450 million face-lift, unveiled on June 13. The boiserie'd reception rooms and signature gold-and-blue palette appear unchanged, but sensitive tweaks give the limestone landmark a bit more sparkle.

Hotelier César Ritz and chef Auguste Escoffier commissioned architects Mewès & Davis to create the grande dame out of a venerable ducal mansion on the Place Vendôme by Louis XIV favorite Jules Hardouin-Mansart. In 1979 Al Fayed—then the owner of Harrods and now the proprietor of Turnbull & Asser—acquired the adored but well-worn hostelry and promptly poured \$250 million into it, installing a pool and a spa, a novelty in Paris hotels at the time.

Three decades later more refreshing was in order. Enter Despont, a Limoges native who had designed Al Fayed's brother Ali's Connecticut home. "What's important to me in commissions like these is to preserve the sense of place," the architect explains. And so he has, led by one of Al Fayed's directives: "Re-use everything you can." Thus furnishings are recast originals or new reproductions, many clad in custom-made Pierre Frey fabrics.

The architect maintained the lobby level's floor plan, but Al Fayed's mezzanine-level apartment was knocked out, allowing



**Clockwise from top left:** The new Salon Proust features a portrait of its namesake novelist, a former Ritz habitué. Maids ready one of the Imperial Suite's beds. The Imperial Suite's lighter, brighter palette.

the ceiling above the gilded-oak front desks to be raised to a gracious height. An overlooked sitting area has morphed into Salon Proust, a paneled library where guests can take tea. A retractable glass roof now shelters the terrace between Bar Vendôme, one of the city's favorite luncheon spots, and L'Espadon, a temple to haute cuisine, enabling it to be used all year round.

Guest rooms have been reduced to 142 from 159, with many of them now suites. While restoring Mewès & Davis's oeil-de-boeuf dormer windows, which had been sliced off in earlier renovations, Despont discovered a maid's room with roof access. Today it's the Mansart Suite, a 900-square-foot, \$13,270-a-night aerie with a terrace offering a 360-degree view of the city. Security was heightened as well: Bulletproof windows have been installed on the *premier étage*, where the Imperial, Chopin, and Windsor suites

can be combined into one vast apartment. Vintage photos, meanwhile, led Despont and his team to revive the Art Deco luxury of the room that now houses the Ritz Bar bistro. The pool and health club—which includes a gym, the world's first Chanel spa, and a David Mallett hair salon—reflect 1920s modernity, too.

Head bartender Colin Field notes that the iconic Bar Hemingway was barely touched but “the lighting is *much* better.” To celebrate the hotel's reopening he created the Clean Dirty Martini. Olive brine, he says, makes “dirty martinis look like bathwater”; his version adds the brine in ice cube form “so the drink arrives crystal clear”—and in engraved glasses that can be purchased exclusively at the gift shop.

“It's hard to redo a place like the Ritz, to make it modern yet keep its soul,” Mallett says. “But Despont brushed off the dust and brought it up to *now* without losing anything.” Even the hotel's private-label, amber-scented candles perfume the five-star air again, the celebrity stylist says, smiling: “The smell of the Ritz is back in the Ritz.” *ritzparis.com* —DANA THOMAS