

# WILD IDEAS

We asked acclaimed architect/designer/tree-hugger Bill Bensley about the future of luxury hotel design and got more than we bargained for.



Shinta Mani Wild



© billbensley



The Slate Phuket



Legacy Yen Tu MGallery



**Q Are we, as in the hotel industry, wasting space?**

A I think it is important for us to produce hotel designs that do not waste space, or most importantly, energy. For example, nobody likes an empty restaurant, but hotel owners cannot afford to turn away potential guests either, so we design our 'all-day dining' restaurants as a series of rooms that can open up and be utilised as and when is necessary so as to not waste energy needlessly.

Another 'trick' we are designing now for the JW Marriott in Jeju is to design into the all-day dining (which is always big to accommodate a full hotel of free breakfast diners) something that transforms into a smaller and different kind of venue for dinner (as none of us would be caught dead eating dinner in the breakfast mess hall).

**Q As travel and tourism grows, do you see owners being more experimental in design, or more generic?**

A Not experimental enough, I am afraid. When I start a new project, with another wacky idea, it takes far too long to get everyone on board. Although it is getting a little easier than, say, 10 years ago.

**Q What are some things you wish were more common in hotel design?**

A Social and environmental responsibility. I love the idea of upcycling. Not necessarily both for the same hotel, but either is a good goal. And I don't speak of the greenwash BS of not washing my bath towel. Hospitality has a captured audience and good if not great messaging can happen in a short period of time.

**Q Which designers are using space the best ways?**

A I love the work of Kit Kemp, Tony Chi, Yabu Pushelberg... these guys know F&B and hospitality!

**Q The Slate in Phuket is one of your top-10 favourite hotel projects – why is that?**

A I love the idea that a hotel can tell the wacky, but historically correct, story of tin mining and still be successful and artistic.

**Q So there is still room in hotel architecture for design for design's sake?**

A Of course there is! The best hotels should be experimental and experiential and take the guest on a journey. So yes, design for design's sake is essential. Good design does not have to have big space. Small is best when it comes to memorable hotels.

**Q You recently undertook a huge project designing Yen Tu, an entire 13th-century Vietnamese village and hotel with local-of-the-era materials. What design lessons did you learn from that project?**

A Sometimes less is more. Here, we kept to only using the materials that we knew existed in the 13th century. We made a big point of keeping 'glass' windows in the shadows and out of sight.

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## “SMALL IS BEST WHEN IT COMES TO MEMORABLE HOTELS.” – BILL BENSLEY

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**Q The concept of luxury is always shifting. What are some hotel 'luxuries' that you don't consider luxurious?**

A Branding garbage! 'Luxurious' hotel brands print logos and names on over-packed plastic toothbrushes, razors, combs and water bottles. All of that is a wasteful use of resources and is essentially branding garbage. At Shinta Mani Wild, we will not entertain single-use plastic.

**Q What to you is the epitome of modern luxury in hotels and hotel design? How do you see 'luxury' changing in the future?**

A Luxury is dead. There is no future there. Real travellers have already ticked the boxes for the hotel lobbies full of copious amounts of flowers and high-thread bed sheets. Serious globetrotters are looking for experiences.

The response we have had to our pending Shinta Mani Wild Bensley Collection in the Cardamon National Park of South Cambodia has been astounding, because our new 15-tent camp is all about out-of-this-world adventures. One has to zipline 500 metres, across a roaring waterfall, twice, to land into the main camp. Only then does the adventure start!

**Q Tell us more about Shinta Mani Wild.**

A For Shinta Mani Wild I became a serious, serious tree-hugger! I had all of the 856 major trees on the site meticulously surveyed, for elevation, type, drip line, girth of the trunk etc. so that we could set our site planning based on tree positions. I was determined not to have to move or cut down even one of the 856 trees.

I developed a very small, flexible plan for the guest room, estates and public areas, which allowed us to flip and turn the footprints

on top of the tree survey. We also designed the architecture to be built on a series of stilts, which could be 'dropped in' to this very steep, densely wooded site without having to move soil. That was a big key: don't move soil if you don't have to, because you then disturb the trees and the natural way the site drains.

I designated 'no building' zones where the site was particularly steep and where the natural streams occurred. We had each and every building set out on site with bamboo and string so that we could understand the volume or mass of the architecture and its relationship to the trees and the terrain. We wrote into the contract of the builders a \$20,000 penalty for the death of any tree and a \$5,000 penalty for the damage of any tree. No trees were damaged.

**Q You've got more than 200 properties in your portfolio – what is a design project you would love to take on that has yet to happen, real or imaginary?**

A I would love to design a boutique hotel in Galle, or a camp in Africa, or a ryokan in Kyoto.

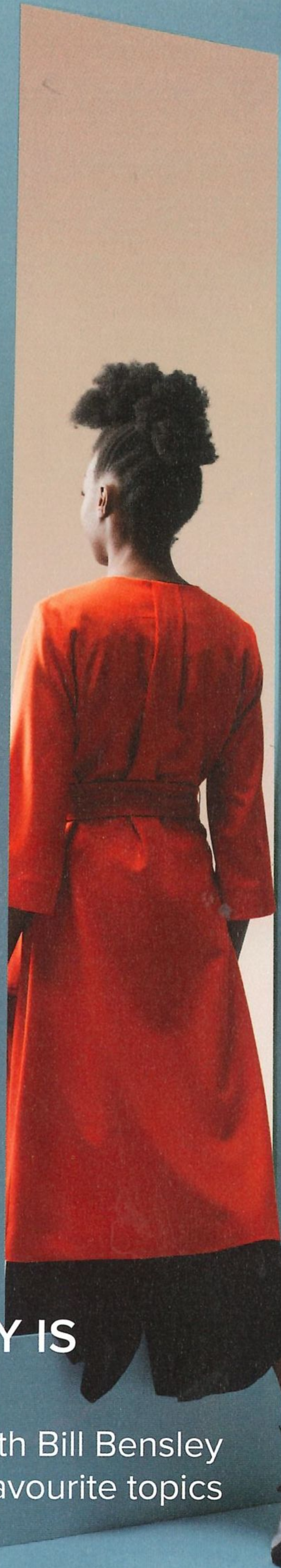
My new real design project is a TV programme, *The Design Disruptors*. Every episode we will introduce a new hotel and discuss how or why this hotel is pushing the boundaries ecologically or socially. We will showcase a design disruptor that has influenced the design of that hotel. That might be a fellow designer, a movie director or politician. We are going to acquaint you with some very unique craftsmen that we have pulled back from the edge of extinction. In every episode we will bring to the table the multitude of ways to upcycle. Fabulous does not always have to be freshly minted! ●



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