



Above: The Shudra room's bath, with fresh plants and a painting that focuses on movement to a higher consciousness
Below: The calming Nirvan room, with its concept Gupta chair

Work and Art

Hundreds of artists, artisans and designers shape myth and philosophy into the exotic interiors of this boutique-sized gem

BY MARY SCOVIAK

Scrolling through her ideas, Mitali Bajaj is trying to manage what she calls the "bus queue" of creative types hoping to work with her Mumbai-based studio, Di. Art + Design (D.A.D.), on Bajaj Group of Hotels' new wave of boutique properties. Just a couple of years ago, she had a hard time getting a hearing anywhere. That was before she rocked the travel world with her design for India's first art hotel, the 16-room Le Sutra in Mumbai. At the outset of that project, she tried to get buy-in from her country's artists and fellow designers for a concept that would

transform the traditional hotel model into a commissioned art installation. Initially, not many hands went up.

To be fair, what she and the hotel group were proposing was way out of the box. Despite the sophistication and splendor of its luxury hotel stock, India has lagged behind the boutique curve. "When we started Le Sutra, many of the designers and artists were not so sure about the viability or the execution of the project. It wasn't something they were used to," says Bajaj. "We get replies like, 'I don't think I can do this' or 'I'm not sure I'd like to take this on.'"



LE SUTRA



A painting of the warrior Karna and an emblem of the Sun (his father) in this Rajasic guest room



Above: Karna's arrow, showcased in the guest bath

ethereal and all aesthetics—traits that reflect a positive, orderly state of mind, as well as balance and purity.

Within that framework, they envisioned commissioned pieces of art, sculpture and furniture that would showcase a unique aspect of these philosophical threads, right down to specific inlays (such as leaves in sattva room to symbolize the mobility of higher thinking) or a concept chair that "silently chronicles" the theme of the individual guest rooms. "Every element had to be based on the material type and color of the specific Guna," says Bajaj. "We wanted guests to be blown away by the blend of story, art and culture."

She hired art curator Abhijeet Gondkar and art coordinator Namrata Punjabi to help find the artists, designers and "visualizers" who could bring Le Sutra to life. With renderings in hand, they visited the alumni of established art colleges in Mumbai, Ahmedabad and Baroda; went to Bauhaus-like collaboratives; contacted more than 120 artists and 40 sculptors asking for submissions and connected with artisans known for doing complex and intricate work.

That face time paid off. In fact, it generated so much enthusiasm that, according

They really didn't believe in the potential of the hotel."

Even her mother, Radha Bajaj, director of the hotel group (Mitali Bajaj's firm is independent of the hotel company), acknowledged that weaving thousands of years of Indian ethos and narrating it through contemporary Indian art was, in her own words, "truly a pipe dream." Bajaj senior appreciates the irony of that statement, since it was her idea to base this conversion of the former Hotel Pali Hill into a design-led boutique based around

the Gunas (innate attributes or tendencies) of Indian philosophy.

Undaunted, the younger Bajaj and her staff began sketching out each of the guest rooms as a virtual canvas to interpret a character (Ravana, Ashoka or Buddha) or characteristics that would reflect one of the three Gunas. The first is tamas, which is colorful, opulent, intricate, erotic and often associated with excess. Rajas is about vibrancy, action, passion, vivacity and style—a strong call to action. Sattva focuses on minimalism, the celestial, the

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The Karna room's Wheel chair, a nod to the warrior's struggles to free his chariot wheel from the mud on the battlefield

Functionality wasn't sacrificed at the altar of art. "The head housekeeper was part of our team and had to approve the furniture, the coverings and so forth. For example, even the sculptures are able to be cleaned with a wet cloth," Bajaj says.

The midnight oil burned over coordinating so many collaborators, synthesizing their styles, coordinating their progress and delivery, making sure everyone stayed "on board" and keeping an eye on the budget. It was well worth it, Bajaj adds. "Many of the people who worked on the project knew only their part of it. So they were amazed when they saw the finished rooms," she says. "The end product was so much more than we expected. Anjolie Ela Menon just looked and said, 'This is historic.' I think that's why Le Sutra's aesthetic found such a responsive audience with journalists, writers, celebrities and newsmakers."

All of those hopefuls who want to enjoy the hotel's halo effect may soon get their chance. Bajaj Group of Hotels has a 116-room hotel under construction at Dehradun, while The Palm Beach Hotel at Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh will be converted to the Le Sutra brand. While they won't be clones, they will share the first Le Sutra's collaborative mindset—fitting since the Sanskrit word "sutra" means a rod or thread that holds things together. **BD**

to Bajaj, once they understood her vision, "Most artists were ready to work for less than their usual rate to be part of a project like this." As for the artists, Bajaj had so many entries that she and her team had the luxury of choosing among works of more than a dozen of India's most prominent creative forces—including Anjolie Ela Menon and Hemant Sonawane. Australian film director Baz Luhrmann and Melbourne-based artist Vincent Fantauzzo agreed to paint a mural on one of the exterior walls. In addition, roughly two dozen designers, two restaurants, dessert café and spa. She set up camps for the sculptors and artists so their work could be done under the supervision of the art team.



The Shree Yantra mandala