



WORDS TONY MAGNUSSON

With Kit gloves

Haymarket Hotel lobby, London, featuring Tony Cragg sculpture and a city landscape by John Virtue; Kit Kemp (below)

When it comes to design-driven luxury accommodation, hoteliers Kit and Tim Kemp have London all bedded up. Now it's New York's turn to be seduced by Kit's exuberant aesthetic.

KIT AND TIM KEMP'S seven hotels are playful, sophisticated, rarefied spaces in which to surrender to the art of leisure, the appreciation of beauty, the romance of being elsewhere. Kit Kemp is the design director of Firdale Hotels, which the Kemps founded in the early 1980s. She specialises in creating hotel environments that consistently fire the imagination. "When I travel," Kemp says, "I want to feel as though it's an adventure, a fantasy world."

The husband-and-wife team's latest adventure is the first to be located outside London: the Crosby Street Hotel in SoHo, New York, which opened in September. The hotel comprises 86 individually designed rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows in an 11-storey, environmentally friendly, new building in the heart of downtown Manhattan.

On the eve of its opening, Kemp had just acquired a striking transparent sculpture by Jaume Plensa for the lobby and was toying with the idea of creating >

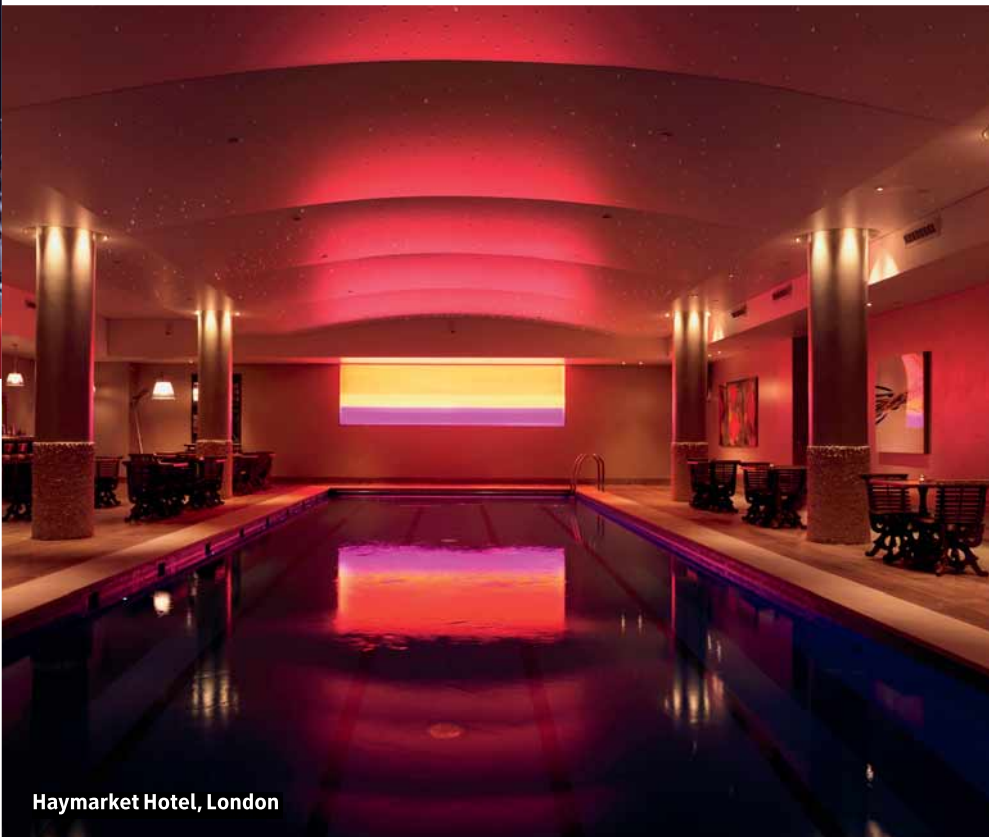




Soho Hotel, London



Lobby at Soho



Haymarket Hotel, London

a photo collage of neighbourhood dogs. The proud owner of three cavalier king charles spaniels, one of whom appears on the hotel's logo, Kemp points out that dogs are welcome. "We like children, too. We like anybody! That's the other thing – our hotels aren't like a club. We're really welcoming."

Kemp's aesthetic is the antithesis of stuffy formality. The lobby of the Haymarket Hotel, in a landmark John Nash building close to Trafalgar Square, is a bold experiment in colour, texture and period. Tony Cragg's melted-face sculpture in stainless steel is the centrepiece of the sleek space, presiding over clusters of remixed Regency furnishings in canary yellow, grey and black, an old-fashioned studio spot lamp, London landscapes by John Virtue and a pebble mosaic along one wall by V&A artist-in-residence Sue Lawty.

Step through to the conservatory and you're in a green, light-filled space decorated with Christopher Farr wallpaper and populated by strange, multi-legged stools and lightshades fashioned from driftwood. In the library there are brightly patterned sofas and Turkish rugs, porcelain vases and ethnic prints, a wall of leather-bound classics and a gas fire. Each room has its own mix of elements, its own narrative.

Guestrooms are no less entrancing. Kemp works on them individually, using leitmotifs common to each hotel, such as the dressmaker's dummies found in every room of the Haymarket Hotel – these are not just readymade sculptures, they also make useful coat stands. It's a monumental task she sets herself each time the duo embarks on a new project, but Kemp wouldn't have it any other way.

"That's the fun part. It would be so awful if I had to do 86 rooms and they were all the same. I'd be heartbroken."



Kemp's work surprises with playful juxtapositions and bold sense of drama

Trained as a graphic designer, Kemp worked for architects and ran her own custom publishing business before meeting Tim, who managed residential properties.

Their first venture, the Dorset Square Hotel (now sold), opened in 1985 and was an instant success. Over the ensuing years Kemp refined her style of townhouse elegance meets cutting-edge, working with her husband on more boutique addresses and even a gastro-pub before opening the Covent Garden Hotel in 1996. It quickly became a haunt of the jet set and put the Kemps on the global map of cool. Even though it's the oldest of the hotels they still own, it attracts a flashbulb-friendly clientele, including Scarlett Johansson, whom Woody Allen filmed there in scenes from *Match Point*.

Twenty-four years into the game, Kemp's work continues to surprise with its playful juxtapositions and bold sense of drama. Her style resists easy definition. Call it contemporary eccentric or bowerbird bespoke, it's difficult to pin down just what makes her interiors come alive in such an idiosyncratic way. "I haven't got that down pat," she says. "It's very hard to talk about and maybe that's the thing – I'm always looking, I'm never finished, I have never arrived. It's the butterfly or the chameleon in me. I don't want the last building to look like the one before. Guests want to see that your building is alive. It's not about standing still." >

HOTEL DESIGN



Haymarket Hotel, London

She is intrigued by the way guests customise rooms and event spaces to suit their own needs. “You design something and then hand it over and it doesn’t belong to you any more. So I’m fascinated to discover how people actually use the rooms.”

Staff take happy snaps as visual feedback. “I like to see exactly how the space is being used and how we can make it more interesting,” Kemp says.

Her passion for contemporary art keeps guests entranced; the walls and public spaces are filled with statement pieces. The lobby of the Soho Hotel in London is overwhelmed – in a good way – by Fernando Botero’s 3m-high fat cat in bronze; and Kemp has acquired works by Sandra Blow and Martin Richman. A fan of Australian art, she has also bought paintings by Peter Atkins and Graham Fransella – although the latter took umbrage at her hanging skills. “I got this dreadful email from [Fransella] telling me I’m a terrible designer because I’d hung one of his works sideways. I love his work – we’ve got it hanging in three of our hotels. We’re very keen on the Aussies.”

Worth about £200 million (\$377.5m), with an annual turnover of £50m (\$94.4m), Firdale Hotels is privately owned by the Kemps, who live with their three daughters in London and Hampshire. They have collected numerous awards for their work, the most recent of which was Andrew Martin International Interior Designer of the Year (dubbed “Oscars for the interior design world” by *The Times* newspaper of London), which Kit Kemp took home in February.

Much of the Kemps’ success lies in their strong commitment to maintenance and refurbishment. “Basically, we’ve never listened to our accountants,” Kemp says. “Every three or four years we change the rooms. That’s the skill, to move the building along and keep it fresh. We spent when we should have spent and now that there’s a downturn our buildings are looking really good. And that’s vital.”

