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June 2017

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Reflections of an Interior Designer

Jeffrey Beers brings a glass touch to the world of hospitality design

It's a sunny April afternoon and Jeffrey Beers is holding court in his artfully cluttered office on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Dressed head to toe in black, he looks as sleek as glass—which is fitting, since his entry into hospitality design came through his love of glassblowing, a talent he acquired in the 1970s while studying with Dale Chihuly at Rhode Island School of Design.

For more than three decades, the 60-year-old Beers has focused on hospitality and residential projects—standouts include The Plaza Food Hall in New York City, the Fontainebleau resort in Miami, and the Hard Rock Riviera Maya—and his work, although rooted in sturdy proportions and solid materials, is informed by glassmaking. “Architecture is a very rigorous field demanding discipline,” Beers says. “The creative process [of glassblowing] resonated with me very powerfully. It was the antithesis of architecture. One could control the form or create something purely with emotion. All of a sudden my work became more sensual.”

Look at any of his projects and this sensuality is immediately clear. Take, for example, The Cove Atlantis in the Bahamas: A breezeway flanked by 35-foot-tall limestone columns and hung with 25-foot-long copper pendants creates a play of light that gives the imposing entryway an intimate, sheltered feel—a kind of ethereal solidity. “Call it a sensual modernism, a tailored modernism, an emotional

modernism, if you will,” Beers says of his aesthetic.

This spring, Beers unveiled his latest project, a \$60 million gut renovation of El San Juan Hotel in Puerto Rico, a legendary magnet for the jet set in the '60s that attracted the likes of Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., Liza Minnelli, and Louis Armstrong. Given the 1958 property's history, refurbishment had to be a careful task. “The hotel had been the epicenter of nightlife for San Juan, and it had this incredible sense of Puerto Rican style,” Beers says. “Our task was to take the bones of the pedigree of this iconic property and reposition them today in the world of contemporary design. I tried to be very tailored about creating new elements that harmonize and coexist nicely with what was there.”

“Jeffrey and I understood each other very well,” says El San Juan Hotel co-owner Andro Nodarse-León. “He loves great hotels and is excited by the magic that they can deliver. This made going through the creative process with him that much more fun and engaging.”

Beers's love of great hotels stems from his upbringing. His parents worked in the travel industry, and growing up, he stayed with them at famous hotels around the world. “From the Hassler to the Connaught to Le Bristol—as a teenager I took it all in,” he says. “I enjoy hotels a lot—they're in my blood.”

After graduating with a degree in architecture, Beers

Jeffrey Beers at the New York City restaurant Porter House, which he designed in 2007





won a Fulbright Scholarship to study the relationship between glass and architecture in Brazil, where he began working with Oscar Niemeyer. “I learned a great deal about the art of architecture from Oscar,” he says. “He approached architecture as a sculptor. His buildings were extremely sensual and fluid. When you enter one of his buildings, you flow through them like water.”

Once he completed his Fulbright—“Living in Rio de Janeiro at 24 and single was a tough experience,” Beers says with a playful smile—he returned to New York. At the suggestion of a family friend, he called the office of architect I.M. Pei (from a payphone, no less) and asked for an interview. He got an appointment for 9 the next morning and a job soon thereafter. There, Beers gravitated toward working on hotels’ public spaces—porte cocheres, lobbies, restaurants, rooftops, ballrooms, meeting rooms—in essence the social aspects of the space. Even today, he says his favorite projects are resort hotels because they represent “hospitality at its greatest. You are welcoming someone to an environment to relax, to not

be burdened with everyday responsibilities. There’s the opportunity to greet them at the front door, to let them enjoy a private room environment, and then show them restaurants, swimming pools, cabanas, golf courses. I love the joy I see on guests’ faces as they move through a resort property.”

Beers launched his own firm in 1986, a year after he designed his first restaurant, Bar Lui, in Lower Manhattan, which earned him oodles of press and commissions. The space featured a 180-foot-long glass bar with a kitchen in the middle and seating running along it “like a modern diner”—a pioneering design for the times. “I blew out 35 light glass fixtures myself in Little Italy,” Beers says with a proud smile.

His glasswork, of course, is still an integral part of his design. As a pioneering member of Brooklyn-based UrbanGlass, a nonprofit glassblowing studio, he regularly works with fellow glass artists for his projects and, of course, still creates his own pieces. For his design of the new food hall Gotham Market at the Ashland in Brooklyn (which happens to be across the street from UrbanGlass), he worked

Above: Beers at work at UrbanGlass in Brooklyn; opposite, clockwise from top left: Gotham Market at the Ashland in Brooklyn; El San Juan Hotel in Puerto Rico; The Cove Atlantis in the Bahamas; Ascent in New York City

“Glassblowing was the antithesis of architecture. One could control the form or create something purely from emotion.”

alongside two other artists to make 180 hand-blown glass bulbs. For his major renovation of Sequoia, a celebrated restaurant on the banks of the Potomac in Washington, D.C., that reopens this month, he teamed with many artists to realize his vision: Hitoshi Kuriyama created a 125-foot-wide installation of glass and neon tubes suspended in “a path and branches” to hang above the dining room; Isidro Blasco made a 3-D wall-mounted collage; and Arne Quinze built a 40-foot-tall metal tree on the terrace. These collaborations enable Beers to achieve his goal of always bringing “art and architecture closer together,” he says. “Whether that be through sculpture or landscape design or painters and their sense of color—artistic expression finds its way into my architecture.”

It’s projects like these that fuel his creativity, he says, noting that he has no plans to retire anytime soon. “I love to work,” he says. “What I enjoy the most about this profession is that every day I never know what I’m going to be challenged with. I’m blessed to learn something daily. It’s really a wonderful way to go through life.”

Michael George (Ascent)

