

'GRAM DESIGNS

Instagram is a visual hotbed of travel inspiration, but how much influence does the app hold over the architects and designers masterminding our photo-ready destinations?

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Walking towards the woven bungalows of the Keemala Hotel in Phuket will inspire a host of feelings in any guest: awe, incredulity, relaxation, and... déjà vu. From the bird nest-shaped private villas to infinity pools nestled in lush jungle, the dreamscape feels oddly familiar. Why? Tagged in over 20,000 posts on Instagram alone, the odds are that anyone with access to social media has, in the digital sense, seen Keemala or a resort like it before.

Keemala is just one of a plethora of hotels and resorts capitalising on social media exposure to leverage their bookings. Designed by Thai firm Architect Space with interior designer Pisit Aongsakultong, the resort ticks a bunch of Insta-friendly boxes: seemingly isolated jungle bungalow – check. Private infinity pool – check. Rustic teak accents, bamboo and brass – check, check, check. It's a well-studied formula for photogeneity, and it pays off. Keemala regularly features in the feeds of IG influencers, luxury travel accounts, and moneyed travellers.

Across the board, the rise of social media has transformed the way we holiday. Instagram is now a one-stop-shop for travel inspiration, hotel guides, discounts and bookings. The visual medium has turned its users into a more design-driven breed of traveller, too. It's now commonplace for holidaymakers to search for destinations based on IG imagery and, crucially, the opportunity to capture such powerful shots for themselves.

It's no surprise, then, that hoteliers and designers are taking note and adapting the way they build spaces to align with social media trends.

“Design is all about problem-solving in a world of constraints,” says Scott Valentine, founder of Valé Architecture, who has undertaken a review of how Instagram impacts on design. “If we do our job well, the end product will seem like it couldn't have been designed any other way. Instagram is a new constraint, it goes beyond the Kodak moment because people share in many

different ways. In 2019, this is the way a business builds brand awareness.”

High-end hotels have always had to be visually appealing places, but today almost every guest has the ability to document their stay with a smartphone, meaning these spaces need to be imminently photogenic.

“More than any other place we've been to, Bali is home to resorts that have been put on the map because they have a strong 'Instagram feature,’” says Sophie Pajak, an Instagram influencer whose channel has close to 16,000 followers. “Munduk Moding Plantation, for example, has a lengthwise infinity pool, and if you stand at the edge you get nothing but amazing skies behind you. This hotel is savvy; they always have a lot of influencers there.”

An awareness of features that work as well on camera as they do in real life has become a driving force in hotel design. For beach properties and resorts, an infinity pool is now de rigeur. For urban



Keemala Hotel, Phuket. Photo by Phil Hadfield (@globe_drifting) and Sophie Pajak (@thesetraveldaze)

For beach properties and resorts, an infinity pool is now de rigeur. For urban hotels, it's neon signs and distressed tiles.



hotels, it's neon signs and distressed tiles. Pajak admits to selecting the hotels she stays in based on their visual appeal, along with the technical constraints of getting the perfect shot. She's not the only one: reports of guests lining up to take the same photo at IG-famous pools and rooftop bars are increasingly common.

"We got to one place close to sunset and had to rush to get the photo, as there was a queue of people waiting for the same shot," she recalls. "People had

travelled and were staying there specifically to get that image." Pajak's photo of the feature received close to 5,000 likes and was reposted by luxury accounts multiple times.

Of course, good design always stacks up and is attractive to guests. The Gallery dining room in London-favourite Sketch, created by India Mahdavi in 2014, arguably launched the now-ubiquitous millennial pink trend. Despite subsequent overuse of the colour, The Gallery's popularity held true.

Left: Munduk Moding Plantation. Photo by Phil Hadfield (@globe_drifting) and Sophie Pajak (@thesetraveldaze)
 Right: Azulik resort, Tulum. Photo by Phil Hadfield (@globe_drifting) and Sophie Pajak (@thesetraveldaze)
 Below: The Gallery at Sketch, London. Photo by Ed Reeve

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The artist-conceived space continues to perform well on social media, featuring in the majority of the 55,000 Instagram posts geotagged to the restaurant. Whether Mahdavi intended to catapult the space into the social media stratosphere is unclear, but she certainly created a template that others could follow.

And many have followed. Investing in Instagram-worthy design has enabled smaller hotels to compete on a more level playing field with big hospitality brands. After all, replicating a viral trend (millennial pink, motivational neons) or introducing an Instagrammable feature (a giant swing, a graffiti wall) is a relatively inexpensive way to put a property on the map.

"Instagram democratizes the guests' understanding of a brand," says Valentine. "Because people follow the recommendations of their friends, or those they follow on Instagram, there's hope for even the smallest business to make it, provided they put the work in."

However, taking a shortcut by replicating design fixtures carries risks - clued up travellers may see through those repurposed aesthetics. Balancing visual appeal with true functionality is key.

“You could make your hotel super Instagrammable, but if you haven’t thought about the needs of your guests and the problem you are solving for them, then you’ll struggle,” says Valentine. “Instagram is one part of the puzzle, and you can’t neglect the other parts just because you put a neon light on the wall.”

Other more subtle currents should inform good design as well, such as location. A tropical jungle bar of teak and bamboo will never look anything but kitsch on a New York City rooftop, for example. Hegemony is never a good look.

“In the past, architectural trends used to last a few hundred years,” explains Valentine. “Now, that timeline is getting shorter, which provides exciting new opportunities for architects, designers, and landscape architects to stand out.”

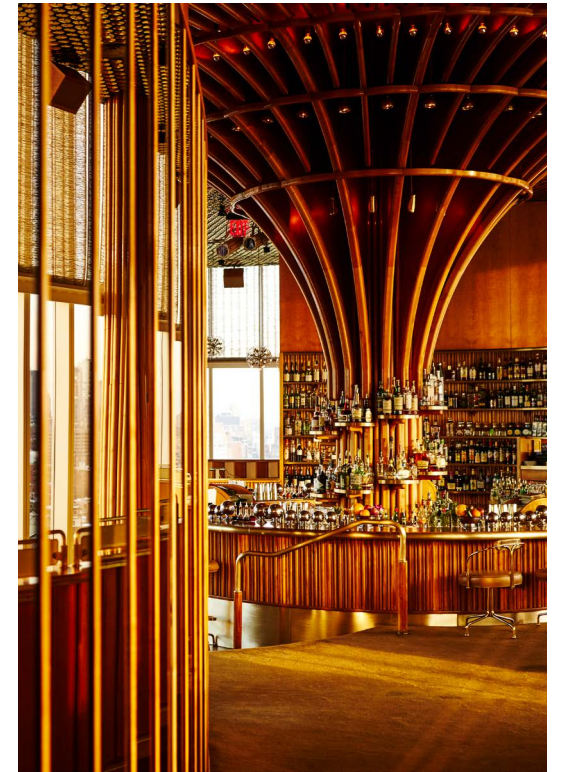
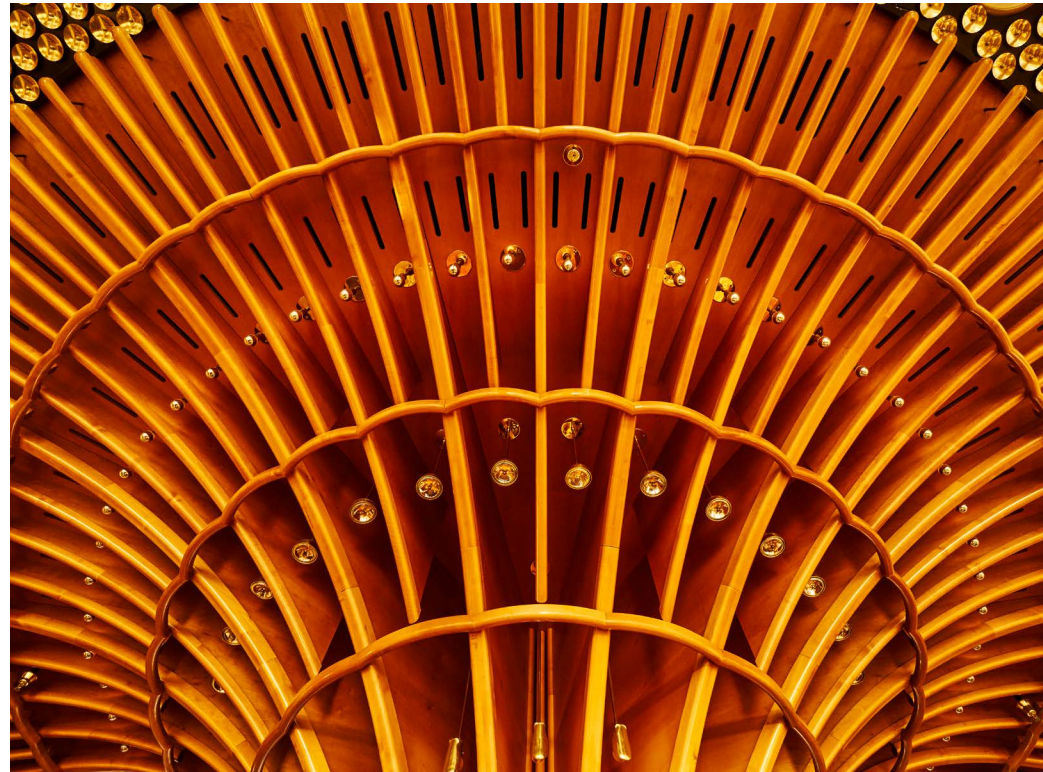
There are places that take viral trends into overdrive, swerving into design-parody. Ibiza and Mykonos beach clubs, like Bikini by Cathy Guetta, which are required to draw in huge crowds over a short season, are particularly guilty of splurging on fleeting trends. Against a backdrop of vintage palm prints, millennial pink, wicker statement chairs and fairy lights, influencers sip frozen pink

drinks astride inflatable flamingos. It’s design hegemony at its worst, and will likely be replaced next season with a new design-by-numbers mix of IG-approved features.

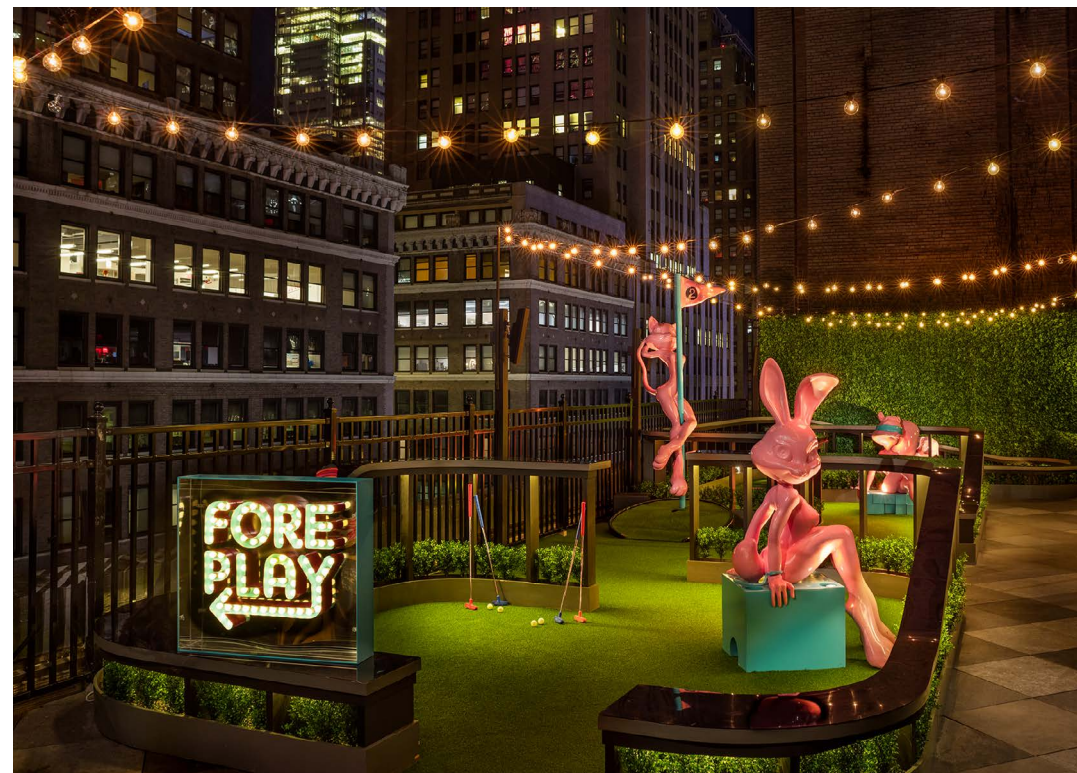
Few designers and hoteliers are explicit about the influence social media has over their process, with some designers railing against the idea. Award-winning British architect Farshid Moussavi recently shared a scathing post on the subject of hotels with Instagrammable features to much applause from the industry.

“Instagram never drives what we design,” says Mitchell Hochberg, President of Lightstone, a real-estate company that owns the very social media-savvy Moxy hotels in Chelsea and Times Square. “Our goal in any new hotel is to create spaces that are visually appealing and stimulating to our guests – if we do our job right, these spaces are inherently Instagrammable.”

Indeed, the Moxy Times Square bar, designed by Yabu Pushelberg, plays on a circus theme with its retro neons and baby elephant lighting features, and the hotel has worked with countless influencers, including Sami Miró (199k followers), and Blake Scott (543k).



Above: Ceiling and bar, The Standard, High Line, NYC. Photos by Adrian Gaut
Below: Moxy Times Square bar and mini golf. Photos by Warren Jagger



Sharing experiences on social media has become an integral part of travelling for many people. It’s an undeniable status signifier, too – getting that shot of yourself alone at the edge of the pool in the Marina Bay Sands in Singapore, or having breakfast on the wood-tambour bed overlooking the Hudson in New York’s Standard Hotel, tells others that you are living your best life (even if you’re not) and indirectly signifies that these businesses are enabling you to do it.

In a landscape of geotags, the poolside selfie replaces a postcard home to loved ones. Instead of offering a pen and mailing the card, hotels offer free Wi-Fi and an attention-grabbing hashtag to help that image reach a global audience. While that might sound deeply unromantic to some, Hochberg is genuinely sanguine about it. “Instagram is a powerful visual storyteller,” he says. “We’re interested to see how the new culture of travellers who see the world through their cameras continues to evolve.”