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PAST PRESENCE

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OF SEA, STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

BY ELIZABETH KERR

Maxime Dautresme's company A Work of Substance has injected renewed excitement into the Hong Kong boutique hotel landscape with The Fleming, offering a quintessential cruise through 1970s design and a clever exploration of the city's nautical nostalgia

Welcome aboard! Brass tacks and wood slats in the reception area of The Fleming are the first hint of the Star Ferry theme

Maxime Dautresme is sitting at a table in Osteria Marzia, the Italian eatery at The Fleming, Hong Kong. He is all unflappable scruffy-chic: a motorcycle helmet is tucked under one arm and a canvas satchel at his feet. But the cool exterior belies a

perfectionist's streak that emerges as he makes his way through the hotel, where his design agency A Work of Substance has been engaged in a two-year project. The agency's creative director and co-founder, Dautresme admits to a healthy degree of fastidiousness. He constantly adjusts accessories and reorganises linens. He frets over a 14-hour playlist he created for the reception that's not playing. He wonders where the new iPod is. "I micromanage. I'm involved in all the parts." And just ahead of The Fleming's re-opening late last month, he had been micromanaging – but not without an equally healthy dose of self-aware humour.

The Fleming began life as a typical mid-rise block in the booming early '70s, lean on the kind of pricy glass now associated with Grade A offices and upscale residences. Though the building's history only goes back 40 years, it was on the harbour-front before later land reclamation, and that position was Substance's jumping-off point for the hotel's reinvention. "The maritime feel was obvious," explains Dautresme. "For that maritime concept we looked at what needed to be done for a hospitality project, and the values that came out were of practicality – because this is a business hotel – of a celebration of culture without being a cliché, and of the social. To be a place to come and socialise."

He and his young team decided the way to approach a redesign was from the outside in, the only solid demand being that the final product incorporate a strong F&B element that would drive traffic and rejuvenate the street in the future. Dautresme credits owner John Hui with the foresight to plug a hole in the market currently dominated by just a few properties (such as The Upper House, Pacific Place). "He saw a shift in hospitality, where there was a need for a neighbourhood hotel with boutique appeal. It was a challenge to make that shift because they were running at 98 per cent occupancy," Dautresme notes.

A sense of place: cast iron and brass scaffolding on the exterior (top right), red mail boxes for guest messengers (right) and nautical-feel lifts (below) are all reminiscent of Hong Kong



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Starting with the shell, Substance collectively broke down the motifs that would define it to a single starting point: the Star Ferry. Beyond being the most popular form of transit at the time, the ferries are a “beautiful piece of engineering”, and were ideal for contextualisation within the hotel. While recognising his position as creative director and all that entails, the process was collaborative. “I’ve been working with this crew for two years, and by now they know I won’t let go of even the smallest item,” Dautresme says. “On my end, because I travel a lot, I’m like a sponge, looking at everything and figuring out my own take on it.” Indicating the facade’s faux scaffolding, he continues, “For my team, they don’t think of it as an art or a craft. They see it as a construction tool. I think it’s beautiful. On the other hand, they’ll tell me what kind of green I should be looking at. It’s a very intense, communal exercise.”

The final design for Dautresme and Co.’s first hotel

project in Hong Kong is founded on maritime culture and the green, off-white, timber and brass of the ferries – with a splash of Hong Kong-specific red (meticulously) thrown in. The Fleming’s cream and green facade now stands like a design beacon tucked among printing houses, car repair shops, the old Wan Chai Police Station and the garish light puce of the Church of Latter-Day Saints on Fleming Road. Stepping beneath the cast iron and brass scaffolding, the entry corridor drops the first hints of what’s to come. Brass tacks and wood slats accent the bell desk; retro marine and lighthouse lens-style lamps illuminate the ramp. Building code requirements for fire services and existing design, “allowed us to explore the idea of having a very narrow entrance that was reminiscent of the backstreets of low-rise Hong Kong that are a signature of the districts for me,” points out Dautresme. “I always wondered what was going on back there.”

The green of Hong Kong segues into Mediterranean blue in restaurant Osteria Marzia, which serves south Italian cuisine



The nautical theme is maintained in the Osteria Marzia restaurant with lamps curved like the ribbing of boats

Wood and rattan room furniture mimics Star Ferry benches



Black bamboo recalling marine construction in South China lines the walls leading to the lift lobby, and elongated porthole windows looking into the restaurant add a mysterious atmosphere. The reception greets the visitor with the first tangible ferry feeling offered by The Fleming. Two-way sofa benches, industrial 1970s pendant lamps, iconic red mailboxes for guest messages, and rope-spool coffee tables make the heritage and history clear, without tipping into kitsch. A brass crab sculpture sits on a tabletop as a symbol of fortune and opulence. “And of course, there’s the hairy-crab connection,” cracks Dautresme. The rich red of the first-floor restrooms is complemented by 50 cent coins set in resin underfoot – which was less expensive than tile.

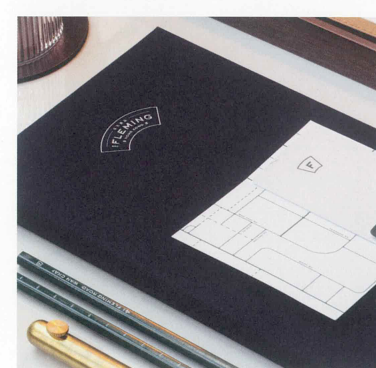
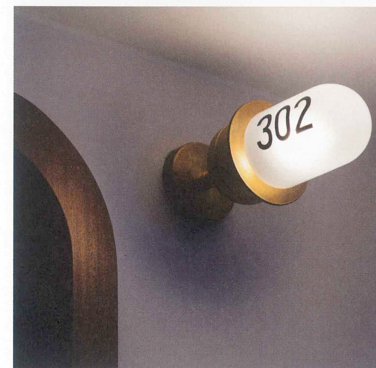
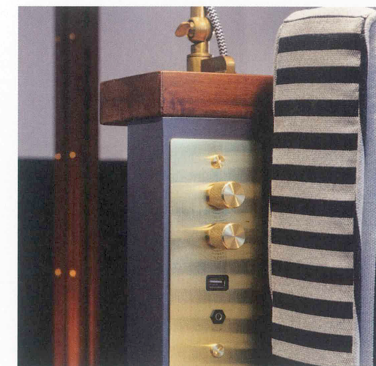
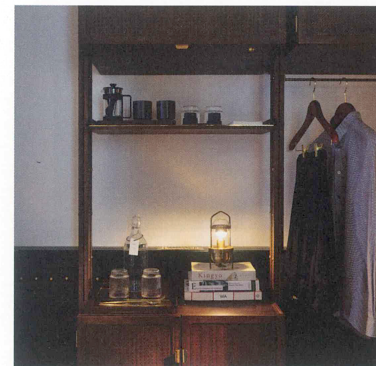
Red ties reception to the lifts and guest floors, 66 rooms in total, categorised simply as small, medium, large and extra-large; hallways are outfitted with wood at the edges and luggage-resistant synthetic rattan in the centre. “We were trying to keep that efficiency, legibility and navigability, and at the end of the day we had to stay elegant in a minimal way. It’s not a show-offy place,” says Dautresme of the understated halls.



ABOVE Ferry green and brass in guest bathrooms



LEFT Ship-shape first-floor restrooms with a floor made of 50 cent coins set in resin



As a business hotel, the guest rooms are practical with business-like brass and wood details

The guestrooms are every bit as nautical as reception. Along with almost entirely customised open-concept storage and furnishings, hardware (brass), bathroom amenities (by Chinese apothecary Shen Nong), a vintage navigation dial motif and the ferry-green create a coherent whole. "Identity is also a symbol of this practicality we wanted," explains Dautresme. Elsewhere in the room, the deep green of the bathroom subdues the shock of brass fixtures, waste is kept to a minimum – no plastic bottles, no coffee pods – a hip-height ledge leaves the upper wall for art, desk chairs mimic the ferry bench. Herringbone marble on bathroom floors is the only design outlier, a request of the owner. Contrary to excessive, the concept works. "As long as it stays true to the three values we defined at the beginning, and as long as nothing competes with it, it allows us to stay consistent but not out of control."

Finally, returning to the ground floor, Osteria Marzia stands apart for its Mediterranean vibe. The Fleming opted for "less overwhelming" southern Italian cuisine heavy on seafood for the Black Sheep outlet. Breakfast demands dictated the size of the restaurant, but the space cleaves to the maritime theme, complete with curving lamps mimicking boat ribbing, lobster-cage table bases, and two statement lamps modelled on fishing floats, a metaphor for the sun. Blue usurps green at Osteria Marzia, because "The Mediterranean Sea has a very specific blue, and I wanted to replicate the depths of that blue," says Dautresme. "The tile and the leather express that, and the yellow expresses the Mediterranean light at different times of the day. It's warm, pleasant, and unique." ■

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