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THE GOLDEN RULE

With 50 years of experience, Atlific Hotels finds success
in owner-manager reciprocity

THE
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ISSUE

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Battered but not beaten,
the luxury segment is
primed for future growth

BEDROOMS OF THE NATION

Designers continue to
reinvent the average
guest room

POWER PLAY

The best hotels
are clean, green and
energy efficient

*Philippe Gadbois
and Robert Chartrand
in the grand lobby of
Le Westin Montréal*

DRAWING ATTENTION

Harry Christakis wouldn't let a global meltdown draw him away from the hospitality business

BY J.D. NEY • PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOHN HRYNIUK

When Lehman Brothers disappeared and the business world temporarily followed it over the edge of despair, you might think that any architectural firm heavily involved in drafting and designing for the hospitality industry might be next in line. However, drawing the roadmap for his company through a difficult recession is nothing new for Harry Christakis, principle with HCA in Toronto.

"I opened the practice in 1991, right in the middle of the recession," recalls Christakis. "Everyone was saying, 'What are you doing?' but really, that's the best time to start, because, hey, if it doesn't work out, you can always blame it on the economy," he quips.

Almost 20 years and several economic cycles later, the notion of the successful firm somehow failing seems far-fetched, given all it has achieved, particularly in the busy Toronto market. With venerable names like The King Edward Hotel, Park Hyatt and a pair of Westins, the firm's CV reads like a who's who of the Toronto scene. In fact, Christakis also has several major projects ongoing in the city, at various levels of completion.

Paul Verciglio, general manager of Toronto's Park Hyatt hotel, is one such client, and he can't speak highly enough of the firm and its namesake principal. Verciglio says Christakis' combination of hospitality know-how, coupled with an ability to listen, makes him an excellent partner.

"Harry has worked on a number of projects at this property, even dating back to when we made the conversion from the Park Plaza, [which opened as a Part Hyatt in 1999]" he says. Verciglio was also very pleased with the work Christakis did on the hotel's Stillwater Spa, which has been named among the top 10 urban spas in the world. "Harry has a wonderful eye for detail," Verciglio continues. "He does a lot of

*PRINCE'S HARRY:
Architect Harry
Christakis relaxes
inside Toronto's Westin
Prince Hotel, where
he recently redesigned
the interior.*



research into a project, and into the surrounding neighbourhood before starting, but he also has a very flexible attitude with regard to input. He's a good listener, so he's never adversarial in his approach."

Being a team player is something Christakis insists upon. And, in a world where architects have developed a reputation for being stubborn, he says it's simply not an option in his approach. "Clients have to see the architect as part of their trusted team," he says. "Sometimes they start right out of the gate with the 'how much' question, and it's all about pricing right off the bat, when they should be asking whether there's a synergy between designer and client. As designers, we're not selling a product. Every time we do something, it's a one off. We're selling our expertise and our time. That's why a good working relationship and synergy is so important."

Christakis found that synergy during another ongoing renovation, this time at Toronto's Westin Prince hotel, and with that property's general manager, Ashok Baghel.

A \$15 million project, Christakis was responsible for a complete renovation of the 30-year-old property's tired public spaces. "Our ultimate goal is to be an urban resort destination, and Harry worked very hard to take that vision and make it a reality," says Baghel.

The hotel's new reality has a cool, modern look, with just enough urban chic to compete in an increasingly trendy marketplace. Large, rich wood pillars line much of the public space, but there's also a great deal of attention paid to the picturesque ravine backdrop outside, with some of the wooden pillars serving as frames for massive windows. However, despite the clean, hip aesthetic, Baghel is quick to point out some of the decidedly unsexy, yet critical operational elements provided in the design. Christakis created features like a hideaway buffet area that can be seamlessly closed-off after breakfast service, a raised eating area that's split by a simple set of stairs for easier server access and newly created meeting areas that leverage previously dead space, all of which increase efficiencies and drive new revenue at the same time.

It's just the sort of high-quality design and functionality that Baghel was after when he started the renovation project. "Harry took the time to really understand what our needs are and also what the needs of our customers are," he says. "A lot of times designers can build something that looks good, but operationally it just doesn't work. With Harry, one of the advantages is that he takes the time to understand exactly what those needs are."

For his part, Christakis says the key to designing a functional space is gaining an appreciation for what he calls the "mini-stories" of the hotel business, and letting those requirements inform your final design decisions. "On the business or the leisure side of travel, hotels encompass hundreds of mini-stories that are being told all over the property every day, from the vacationer, to the business person

working a conference," he says. "So the room, or the lobby or bar, is a place to do business. It's a home-away-from-home, or an escape. You have to be able to see that space as all of those different people see it, and want to use it, and you have to design it with all of them in mind."

Christakis designs and builds functional spaces that meet a certain aesthetic, but he doesn't compromise usability, which is the key to keeping clients happy. "We're not sculptors," he starts. "We just create spaces that are used by people and that are beneficial to their everyday lives."

Increasingly, hotel customers are looking to bring that everyday life mentality to their hospitality experience, which means a focus on a high-end residential feel and user-friendly amenities. "I think we're still trying to create a residential feel, in that it's always going to be about comfort," says Christakis. "But from that feeling, we're trying to bring an increasing level of functionality. Basically, the room should work for the guest, as opposed to the guest having to work to figure out the room. What's the industry average stay these days? About 1.5 nights? If you're staying anywhere for one night, everything should be intuitive."

Creating a more contemporary and sophisticated resi-

"We're not sculptors. We just create spaces that are used by people, and that are beneficial to their everyday lives"

dential feel was certainly the goal of The Park Hyatt, when that property embarked on its \$16-million, 346-guest room renovation with HCA. In an upscale hotel market that's about to get a lot more crowded — with the additions of ultra luxurious Ritz-Carlton, Shangri-La, Trump, Thompson and Four Seasons hotels by 2011-2012 — Verciglio says his Bloor and Avenue landmark will be ready to meet the challenge. "We're in the process of completing the sample room right now, and I can tell you that this room will compete with the new competition heading into Toronto," he says. "The rooms will all be extremely functional and compartmentalized. Harry has put a lot of thought into how guests will experience this room. It's going to be very residential, pleasing and comfortable," he adds.

How comfortable is the hospitality market, mid, or dare we suggest, slightly post-recession? According to Christakis, it's been a mixed bag. But regardless of the economic times, Christakis is adamant that the hospitality industry has, and will continue to provide a fantastic group of people with whom to work. "That's really the wonderful thing about hospitality," he says. "You get to meet and work with some amazing people, and that's what I enjoy. It's like a small extended family. I feel very fortunate to be involved in it."

A suitably team-first attitude from an architect who, when asked to comment on client impressions of his work, said, "Ask them. They can do the talking. I just draw." ♦