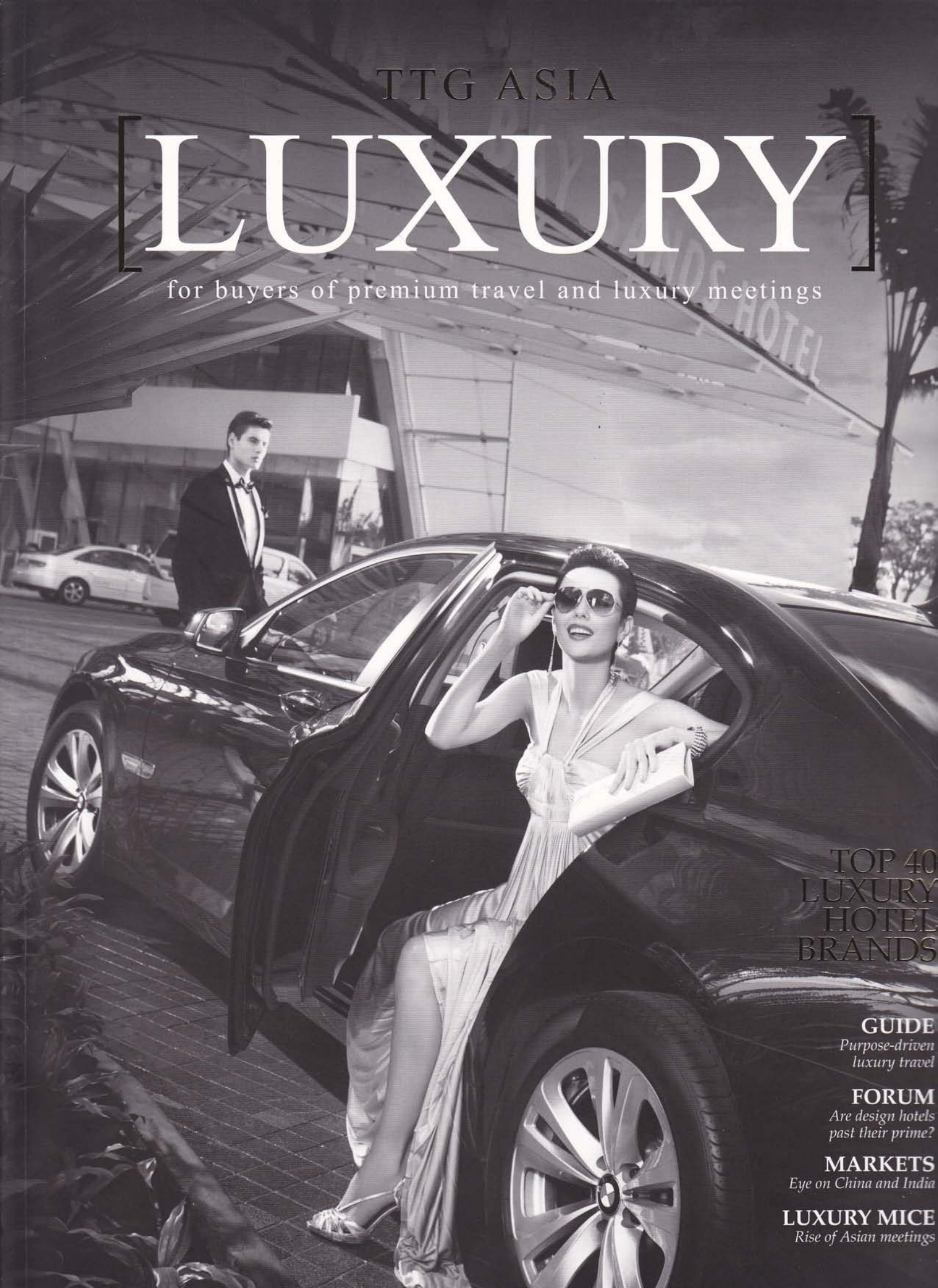TTG ASIA

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HOW TO BE RELEVANT

Design, hip, boutique, art, trendy hotels – whatever you call them, they have become a part of the industry. The question is, how do they remain stylish and relevant when consumer needs change rapidly? Leading hospitality design companies tell Raini Hamdi, plus a look at how two design hotels do it

ON THE PANEL
(from left)

Lyndon Neri
Founding partner, Neri & Hu Design and Research Office (HDRO)

Christopher Chua
Associate director-architecture, Blink Design Group

Warren Foster-Brown
Managing director/owner, FBEYE International

Federico Masin
Associate, Hirsch Bedner Associates

Q. What breakthroughs in design hotels would you like to see?

Masin The rapid expansion of the middle class in the emerging economies is generating large and somewhat 'generic' hotels. The effort of making luxury available to large numbers of people is eroding the idea of luxury itself, into what I call 'generic luxury'. True luxury requires unique experiences, so I welcome anything that is not generic. It could be how the hotel incorporates local traditions, or the way the service is delivered – many things.

Neri I'd like to see a strong cultural agenda. You see it in the Mercer hotel in New York, Camper hotels in Berlin or Barcelona, Amanpuri in Phuket, Eet Heim in Stockholm, Tawaraya Inn in Kyoto and Montalembert in Paris, to cite a few examples.

Foster-Brown We would like to see more flexibility in incorporating the local culture and

sense of place in every project, as this will make it unique on its own accord.

As well, the use of technology to check in from airport, or before departure, and to access the room using mobile phone, credit card or identity card which is embedded with magnetic strips and chips. The ability to weigh your luggage and check in to airport from hotel could be another breakthrough – we did work on this for a project, but it never came to fruition.

More control over the room ambience with mood lights and connectivity options that are easily understood. It is rather annoying to spend half the night figuring out how to turn the lights off.

I would like to see new concepts in bathrooms, knowing how important the shower experience is. In short, the design identity of the hotel should bring about unique experiences, new comforts and new indulgences.

Chua Most design hotels that I've observed in my work and leisure travel suffer from what I would call a 'disjuncture' in experience – over-designed spaces, over-trendy materials, an almost 'trying too hard' feel that can come across as a little kitschy. The small details that should work – lights, switches, showers – but don't, due to design taking precedence, can be an overall letdown. To me, the small stuff are the grand gestures.

A good breakthrough is to transcend design from being purely aesthetic into a realm where space, form, intimacy, grandeur, senses and technology are a holistic, living reprieve. Adrian Zecha and his team have managed to epitomise this.

What I find missing is a good reading and profiling of a guest, i.e. identifying whether he wants to be serviced and greeted or left completely undisturbed, whether he'd rather check in en route from the airport than the 20 minutes standing at the reception, etc. Can we *design* a hotel that allows 'pure' luxury in terms of individual service and attention to needs and likes? Have a supple design that allows for slight room adjustments for repeat guests that prefer their work desk a certain way, or public spaces that allow a guest who always travels alone to have his own private corner.

Q. Speaking of customer reading and profiling, what are the big changes that design hotels must adapt to?

Masin Perhaps the most interesting is the emerging middle class in Asia, which is a heterogeneous demographic group, where anything that is well-done and well-thought-through will work (but the end-result is 'generic' luxury).

Neri Clients are becoming more global. They have two desires on a short trip: cultural immersion and a sense of tranquility. They want the hotel to have a strong sense of domesticity (home) to give them peace and rest but, at the same time, these new customers want a hotel culture that is contextual and rooted to the place that they are visiting.

Foster-Brown We live in a world when trips are measured in hours, not days or months, hence the choice of where one stays has become top priority.

The market is in their mid 20s to mid 50s, middle to upper income, well-travelled, technologically-savvy and socially-conscious. Extensive information on hotels in magazines, newspapers and online media exposes them to different hotel designs from around the world and they have the ability to choose a hotel that best suits their lifestyle and personality. The design, therefore, should not only offer individualised attention and personal satisfaction but incorporate a sense of place that most hotels lack these days.

The increased use and dependence on technology to engage and retain guests is a key matter to look into. As tablets, electronic concierges, in-room connectivity and entertainment system would continue to enhance the ambience, convenience and comfort, design hotels, unlike traditional hotels, should compete by providing a particular lifestyle experience that would exceed the guest's physical, emotional and well-being needs.

Who wants to be at home when one can be in a home one dreams of? That's the dream stay.

Chua The leisure traveller and the business traveller have merged into a single domain. Business hotels and vacation resorts now are almost indistinct in profiling. You have design hotels for the business traveller, such as East Hong Kong, with a strong business front and, conversely, leisure hotels with excellent work connectivity.

Regrettably, most leisure travellers work on their holidays and require facilities that they are used to on their work trips. Business hotels are no longer the dull, almost beige format – they front their public spaces with cool bars, top-notch restaurants and excellent spa and gym facilities. Design hotels must be flexible and cater to this amalgamation.