

TOKYO'S DISNEY AMBASSADOR HOTEL

ROBERT A. M. STERN CONJURES A MODERNE FANTASY FOR JAPAN'S MAGIC KINGDOM



Text by Patricia Leigh Brown/Photography by Peter Aaron/Esto

ROBERT A. M. STERN—distinguished dean of the Yale School of Architecture, esteemed author and scholar, creator of too many celebrated works of architecture to mention—has always had a deep affinity for a certain pivotal twentieth-century figure: Fred Astaire.

"I've always wanted to design a hotel that was like stepping into a Fred and Ginger movie," the architect cheerfully admits, counting the mythical Venice Lido in the 1935 film *Top Hat* as one of his favorite places.

With the new Disney Ambassador Hotel at Tokyo Disneyland, influenced by 1930s Hollywood musicals and the optimistic swoops of Streamline Moderne architecture, he has finally gotten his wish. Poised just outside the Magic Kingdom, about eight miles from downtown Tokyo, the 504-room hotel consciously evokes the 1930s, an era that gave birth to Radio City Music Hall and great passenger ships like the *Normandie*. "The world was pretty rough for vast numbers of people," says Stern.

continued on page 34



ABOVE: Robert A. M. Stern designed the Disney Ambassador Hotel, near Tokyo. The curves and circles of the porte cochere introduce the hotel's Art Déco motifs.

LEFT: "As guests go through the entranceway, they leave modern Tokyo and enter a place with 1930s Moderne glamour—a look that's rarely seen in Japan," says Stern.

ROBERT A. M. STERN

RIGHT: The plaza is a transitional space between the hotel and the entertainment and shopping areas. Stern used bright blue detailing to create a resortlike atmosphere.



continued from page 32

“Films and architecture provided an aura of glamour to distract them.”

The Ambassador is the sixth hotel that Stern has designed at a Disney resort. In many ways they are a perfect match: The architect has long been an unabashed fan of both movies and grand resort hotels, a genre he believes has gotten short shrift from architectural purists. Environments designed for the fine art of pleasure, resort hotels “combine archi-

itecture and showmanship,” Stern has written.

Of course, no one combines architecture and entertainment like Disney, which, since the late 1980s, has been casting some of the world’s most outstanding architects, Stern chief among them, in starring roles. “When you design a resort, especially for Disney, the first thing on the agenda is the transformation of a mood, of immersing visitors in a dream world,” he observes. “After all, it’s a movie company. As an archi-

tect you rise to that mandate.”

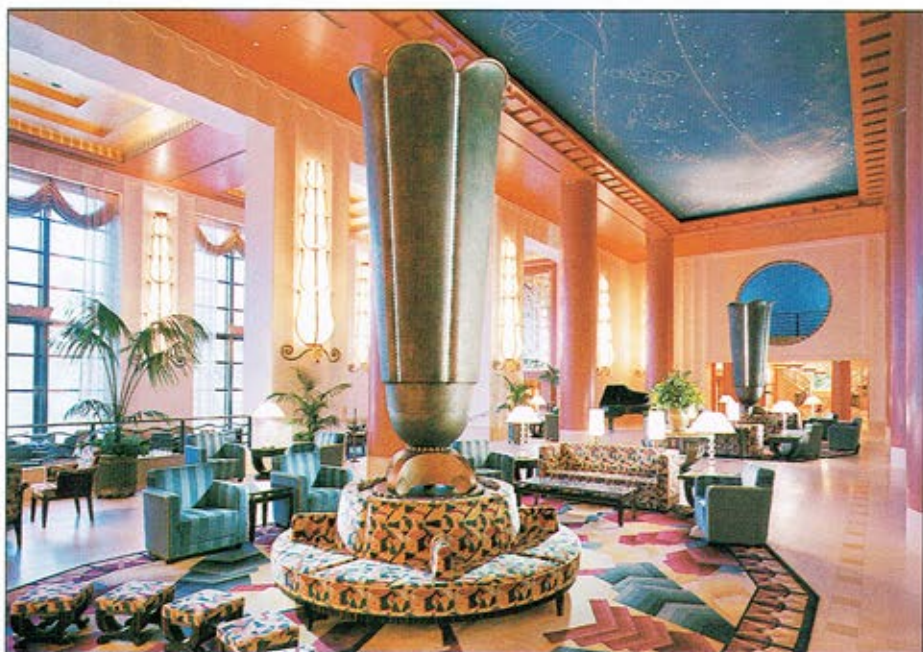
The dream begins on arrival, when you pull up to a huge porte cochere that conjures up images of, but does not imitate, the upper deck of the *Normandie*. Although this area of Japan often experiences driving rain, the hotel is designed to feel like Miami Beach—specifically, the exuberant sunbaked Art Deco hotels lining Collins Avenue, with their distinctive rounded balconies and ornamental glazed-tile banding glimmering in the sun.

Japan does not have its own legacy of Art Déco buildings, which, along with a healthy dose of Hollywood, adds to the fantasy. “I don’t know how many Japanese people know American movies from the period,” Stern says. “Our cultures were extremely far apart in those days. The hotel is designed to connect to a glamorous past that also feels of the moment and modern.”

Lobbies—the more audacious and over-the-top the better—were a hallmark of celebrated Art Déco buildings. The Ambassador’s lobby is an homage, with some pixie dust thrown in, to the days when chatting or sipping a cocktail was deemed worthy of a backdrop of architectural grandeur.

continued on page 36

BELOW LEFT: “The interior of the lobby was inspired by 20th-century French designers and the *Normandie*,” says Stern. BELOW: An egglomise mural overlooks the lobby lounge.



ROBERT A. M. STERN

continued from page 34

Designed in the spirit of Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann and Jean-Michel Frank, sixteen-foot-tall bronze torchères, encircled by banquettes, cast light on the ceiling. And what a ceiling! At first glance it appears to be Grand Central Station transported to Japan, with its legendary constellations twinkling in the luminous turquoise sky. But on closer examination, they turn out to be Peter Pan, Tinkerbell, Aladdin, Jasmine and Dumbo.

Throughout the building, hundreds of Mickey Mouses have been subtly incorporated into the interior, hidden in everything from lampshades to duvet covers.

Of course, this wouldn't be Disney without a picture-perfect moment, and Stern provides a whopper. From



LEFT: The grand stair gallery is lined with a pearwood ceiling and columns, bronze fixtures and gold-leafed domes. The stair rails were fashioned to look like filmstrips.

the gleaming grand stair gallery, guests—often wedding parties—ascend a romantic staircase, with a metal banister depicting Mickey and Minnie Mouse as a filmstrip, its edges resembling sprockets. After pausing on the

landing by the Cinderella castle mural (click!), they continue to the Stern-designed Gothic-style wedding chapel (how many famous contemporary architects have created one of those?).

Stern distills the mesmer-

izing essence of Art Déco throughout the Ambassador Suite. “Déco was a name created in the 1960s,” he notes, always the professor. “Nobody called it Déco in the period;

continued on page 38

