



The US\$2 million facelift of Hotel Diva gives a new edge and a broader market base to this award-winning San Francisco boutique hotel.

Viva Diva

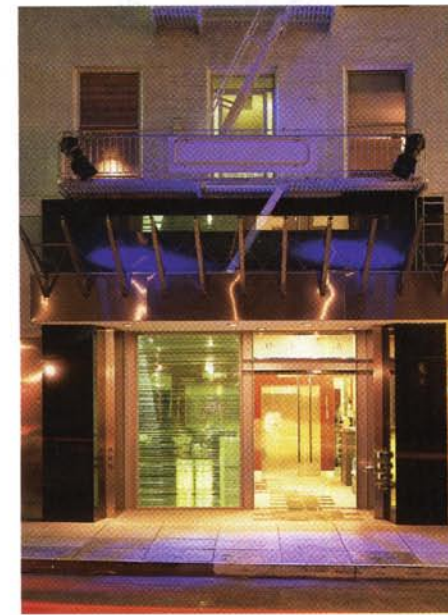


Photo: Richard Barnes



Even those who have seen it all, haven't seen this: guestrooms with rolled steel headboards, mesh chairs and lateral files used as a dresser. Beyond the design punch are practical points all travelers will appreciate: good lighting, a great mattress and fine linens. The bathrooms are a study in contrast, with black granite slab vanities played against a white tile framework. The break in the theme: An unexpected tangerine shower curtain.

Photo: Robert Beck

By Mary Scoviak-Lerner, Design Editor

San Francisco hotelier Yvonne Lembi-Detert doesn't buy into a *Time* magazine article's contention that good design is no longer about function. "How can they say that? That's nonsense. You can't have good design without function," insists Lembi-Detert, president of San Francisco-based Personality Hotels on Union Square.

An unexpected mantra from someone considered a pioneer of boutique chic in San Francisco and head of a company whose style-setting five-hotel portfolio ranges from sleek minimalist elegance to Zen coolness and romantic escapism. Lembi-Detert's latest test of her contention comes with the US\$2 million renovation of the 111-room Hotel Diva, the property that rocked San Francisco's fairly traditional hotel scene when it opened with its Euro-chic Italian style in 1985. Her challenge to award-winning San Francisco architect/interior design firm Lundberg Design (whose recent work includes the cutting edge look for the main lobby and furniture at Oracle) was not only "to make Diva up to date and beyond," but to achieve that within the context of operational standards and a realistic return on investment.

"We wanted to make a design statement with the renovation of Diva, but we did not want to do that at the expense of function," says Lembi-Detert. "It's not enough to say a fabric will wash well. You have to put lipstick on it, pour coffee on it, then ask the head housekeeper to run it through the wash to see whether

the fabric withstands these common stains. You cannot take someone's word that a hard material will hold up. Sometimes, you need to bang your shoe against it to find out whether it will crack. The hotelier has to know how every aspect of the design will perform because he or she is the one who has to work with it—or be stuck with it."

What has set Lembi-Detert apart from the stringently *caveat emptor* owners and operators who confine design to the proven and practical is her willingness to reconsider what functional really means. And that is what has pushed the Hotel Diva and the rest of her portfolio onto new design turf. For the Diva, T. Olle Lundberg, principal of Lundberg Design, took his inspiration from an abstraction of an elegant 1920s ocean liner, then punched it up with ultra modern sculptural architectural references. The vision of his design team, which included designer Ian Glidden and project architect Luke Mandle, extended to creating a "sea" of cobalt blue carpeting throughout the guestrooms and guest corridors—very plush without a stain-masking pattern.

"There were initial concerns about the plushness of the carpet, whether it would hold up and how much maintenance it would require," admits Lundberg, who had never designed a hotel before the Diva renovation. "We had to demonstrate that vacuuming would bring it back to a pristine look. That actually worked to our advantage because the room looks really well cared for." Says Lembi-Detert, "I was concerned about foot traffic showing on that carpet. But, I liked the idea. It's like footprints showing up on a beach. ▶

The renovated facade of the Hotel Diva (center) is a powerful marketing tool for the hotel's new look. Gone is the "ponderous canvas awning" that masked the entry and made the lobby fairly dark. In its place are an almost fluid-looking, stacked glass wall and a gleaming surround that hint at what lies inside. The interiors deliver on the exterior's promise of cutting edge design, from the back-lit drama of the onyx panels on the reception desk (left) to the sleek appeal of this suite with its residential mix of color, furnishings and accents—including an inviting fireplace. (For Product Sources, see p. 107.)

The renovation report card: Rates up about 30% to US\$259; occupancy trending up from 70% to 80% or more; and a steady 55-60% return factor.

The cobalt blue surprises guests and they like the water imagery it helps to create. In fact, that color really struck such a chord with us we decided to use it throughout our brochure."

Lundberg's design team and Lembi-Detert made sure every aspect of the guestrooms would continue to "surprise" guests while still meeting their needs. "Yvonne Lembi-Detert was really interested in getting a solution that wasn't a decorator's solution but, rather, an architectural solution," says Lundberg. "She wanted the design to be sculptural, which meant working with items that had mass and volume and using an architect's palette rather than a designer's palette."

Drawing on a reputation for sculptural design, the architect/designer married form and function into the rolled steel headboards that are the signature design element in the guestrooms. Despite the cold connotations of steel, the close-up look of the headboard is more satiny than steely, and the sensuous design lends comfortable support for those who relax by reading in bed.

Lundberg also used the design of the headboard as a framework for rectifying another problem that bothered him in the rooms prior to renovation: The lighting. "These rooms needed better lighting, not the kind with a single wall switch," says Lundberg. His solution was to position an uplighter protruding from the top of headboard and enhance both the quality and experience of light with cobalt blue accent sconces and other



Photo: Richard Barnes

strategically positioned lighting. Guests can change the mood from well-lit for working to the singular experience of a blue-washed room using only the sconces.

The design team also redefined the idea of casegoods. Replacing traditional armoires and dressers are lateral file cabinets warmed up visually with maple wood tops. "The lateral files were a scary decision. But, the designers showed us how well they served as desks and dressers, that the drawers didn't stick and that they looked great with the overall design of the room. However, we believed they needed a custom sleek wooden top, providing a new element and warmth to the room," says Lembi-Detert. She also insisted the rooms continue to feature "5-star mattresses. We advertise our great beds everywhere, from the back of the parking signs to guest comment cards," she adds.

Dramatic Impact

The dynamic tension between form and function also rewrote the design concept for the hotel's small lobby. The designers stripped away the exterior canvas awning that made ▶

"When I did room tours before Diva's renovation, I thought, "This is the 80s. This is getting old. Diva needs to move into the millennium." —Yvonne Lembi-Detert

Lundberg Design, whose portfolio ranges from its award winning residential design for Larry Ellison, CEO of Oracle to several multimedia centers in San Francisco, used its sculptural, architectural approach to give a new definition to the Diva's guestrooms and suites. Mesh chairs, shelving and a pedestal table double as art elements in the guestroom (right). In the suite below, both the materials and lines used in the space echo the abstracted elegance of a 1920s ocean liner.



Photo: Robert Beck

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the lobby rather dark, as well as the dark leathers that made it cutting edge in the 1980s. Marking a major change, they heightened the impact of the lobby by visually opening it up to the street with a stacked sheeted glass window that looks "like frozen layers of ice." This makes it possible for the lobby light to filter into the street and pinpoint the hotel's entrance. The configuration also means one section can be replaced without the expense or time required for the entire glass area.

A curving granite reception desk with back-lit onyx panels stands as the focal point of the lobby. Vibrant yet light looking, the desk casts a yellow glow that "makes everyone look tan and healthy," says Lundberg.

"Since the hotel's aim was to attract the client who might go to a Ian Schrager hotel or another strongly designed boutique hotel, we knew we couldn't deliver a mediocre lobby," says Lundberg. "The guest couldn't get past that. So we used a fairly large part of the budget to create a lobby that was important—one that would work with the rooms as part of a complete guest experience."

Keeping the hotel competitive and able to grow market share in the face of mounting competition, which includes Schrager's planned renovation of the landmark Clift Hotel, was one goal of the renovation. Patrick Sampson, Personality Hotels' CEO, used the renovation as a launching point for the improved standards and services that would work with design to hold and grow Diva's market base.

"Diva traditionally has had a corporate client base," says Sampson. "We made sure this renovation would include an investment in the technical services to better meet that market's needs. For example, we created a breakfast room with e-mail accessibility. We upgraded our own systems so there would not be any mis-postings, and we incorporated the necessary business amenities such as dual phone lines, safes, voice mail and dataport capabilities. Beyond technology, you have to put guest services on a pedestal." That is one reason the hotel's concession-run restaurant, California Pizza Kitchen, provides roomservice and why the hotel is currently looking at enlarging public space within an area slated to become a relaxing library.

Unique design backed by personalized service gave the Diva an even stronger selling point against the large hotels and chain hotels that dominate much of the higher end market in San Francisco. Although clients of "the more luxurious, 5-star hotels tend to remain loyal to those properties," Sampson says, the renovation has broadened Diva's reach into the base of upscale clients bored with traditional business hotels. "Many of the guests who have come to us because a convention hotel is full do come back," says Sampson. They have helped fuel not only a 30% increase in rate, but what Lembi-Detert projects will be a 10 percentage point gain in occupancy over the 69-70% posted by the hotel before the renovation began. ♦



Photo: Richard Barnes