



Stay overnight in Swann's wonderland

BY EVA FRIEDE, THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 9, 2010

STORY PHOTOS (1)

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Photograph by: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, THE GAZETTE, The Gazette

MONTREAL - Call it a stealth hotel. On the outside, Montreal's newest boutique hotel, Hotel Chez Swann, is a faux Tudor building in dismal shades of brown and beige.

Inside, enter the somewhat surreal, theatrical vision of designer Mary Moegenburg. On a backbone of white and black, she has created scenes in vivid colours, using furniture, art, installations and objects mostly made in Quebec, many of her own design.

"This hotel is such a misperception. Come in from outside and you have no idea," Moegenburg said. "I decided to play with perception and to play with reality."

The hotel name references Swann's Way, the first volume of Marcel Proust's masterwork, now known in English as In Search of Lost Time, Moegenburg said, in that it picks up on the French author's exploration of time, space and memory.

"It's not a theme hotel," general manager Bob Eyton-Jones pointed out. "But the concept of the design comes from memory."

He suggested that tree trunk coffee tables, snakeskin ottomans or surreal grassy green carpets (shag redefined for the 21st century) might evoke guests' memories of childhood.

There is indeed a sense of disorientation, as if you had dropped down the rabbit hole into Alice's wonderland of things that are not quite as expected.

There is sensory overload as you enter the whitewashed entry with its giant lime-bordered blackboard and an installation, by fashion designer Elisa C-Rossow, of purple nylon slashes of fabric over silver bead curtains.

An intense sky-blue neon light installation, from Montreal's Swon Design, hangs behind the front desk, which was crafted by Marc Pelletier from blocks of different kinds of wood.

A snakeskin textured S-curved banquette comes from another Montreal company, Delta Furniture, a supplier to the hotel industry in Canada and the United States.

Framing a white wall, where on one occasion the Chinese erotic film 2046 was dimly projected, are two industrial glass lamps from Emmanuel Cognee's Lampi Lampa. One is slightly larger than the other, contributing to that sense of disorientation.

The lobby is a gallery offering an entrance experience, Moegenburg said: "You drop to your knees as you walk in because of the art work."

Built in 1919 as La Maison Tudor, the building was a garment factory in its early days, Eyton-Jones said. In more recent years, it was home to a tailor shop, lawyers' offices and the Mad Hatter pub. The dowdy exterior of the three-storey structure on Drummond St. is one of the few holdouts in central downtown; after the building that sat over de Maisonneuve Blvd. was torn down, opening up the street, the area was spruced up with highrise luxury condo towers, the bicycle path and chic restaurants and cafes. Three years ago, Le Pois Penchee, a bordello-chic bistro, opened on the de Maisonneuve Blvd. side of the building.

Moegenburg and Richard Lavallee of Movement Properties, aco-owner of the hotel, hope to brighten the exterior, pending urban-planning approval.

We need to respect the historical record, said Lavallee, who has developed hotels in Tremblant, Florida and Taos, N.M.

Whitewashing and aluminum signage are among the options being considered for the exterior.

Of course, the 23 rooms are done with the same sense of play as the lobby.

"I want to inspire whoever comes in here to be creative," said Moegenburg, who trained in Japan and works in graphic, exhibition and film design as well as interiors. An American, she divides her time between here and New Mexico.

"We've created a little stage in every room. It's so theatrical," she said, adding that she works with spaces within spaces.

Bigger rooms have staged sitting areas in jarring, unexpected colour schemes: the hyper-real grass area carpet, with red shantung loveseat and blue velvet armchairs of Venetian inspiration, from Italy.

Bedspreads and window-seat banquettes are plush red for a boudoir feel, with florid brocade headboards of blue and green or coffee and black.

Coffee and bedside tables are tree trunks, while magnificent black lacquered armoires, designed by Moegenburg and also crafted by Delta, have a diamond etched pattern, echoing Quebec's historic diamond-point pine furniture, but thoroughly modern.

The best oddity: the amuse-douches: shower stalls in black and white tile, with peek-a-boo windows and a Hitchcockian feel. In some rooms, you can lie on your bed and see through the shower stall into the bathroom.

Bathrooms have a hunter green wall, and swirly designs in black on white painted over the vanities. The swirling motif repeats, in white on black, on the ceilings in public and private spaces throughout the hotel.

"I wanted to create something different from other hotels," Moegenburg said.

Hotel Chez Swann, 1444 Drummond St., 514-842-7070, is rated four stars; room prices vary from \$235 to \$450, depending on the season and size of room. Currently, there are specials available at \$125 a night.

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