

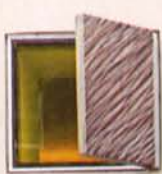


urban idyll



## STRIP TEASE

The window, being at the level of the floor of the bar on the second story, offers a fine view of fashionable footwear and shapely legs.



T an Schrager's eyes are gleaming. It's right after Labor Day, and he's just returned from four weeks of vacation, part of which he spent camping with his daughters at the Grand Canyon—for where else should a world-famous hotel builder holiday than in a tent? It's a glorious morning, with a breath of autumn cool in the air and sunshine shafting down the New York street grid, lighting up fire-escape stairs like spiderwebs.

A new season's anticipation seems to be flooding into the city. But above all, it's Schrager's first day back, and he's overseeing the finishing touches on his new baby—the 1,000-room Hudson, the biggest hotel he and Philippe Starck have yet created and the first in his hometown in ten years. Standing at the hotel's entrance on a nondescript midtown street in the West Fifties and wearing his preferred Ordinary Joe outfit—a blue button-down over a white undershirt, khakis, and a black jacket—he says the Hudson “will be Philippe’s biggest triumph and mine.” Then a watery-eyed old man passes by, asking him what’s going on—“Is it a restaurant or something?”—and the link is made between Schrager’s world of Kate Moss and Madonna and the city’s everyday life. “I love that about New York,” says Schrager. “Absolutely everyone wants to know what’s happening.” So does he—in the fast-moving world of hotel building, a lot changes in a month.

Then Schrager walks into the frenetic building site of the still-emerging hotel, picking his way past the clamshell-shaped sections of a giant light fixture that was

A bedside lampshade.



The Hudson Bar.



The Hudson is Ian Schrager's biggest, most ambitious,  
and cheapest hotel yet. Rowan Moore  
checks in. Photographed by François Halard.



**SURREAL CHIC**  
An antique billiard table  
in the hotel's library,  
and, OPPOSITE, its "private  
garden," which recalls  
New York's long tradition  
of rooftop oases.

Sittings Editor:  
Miranda Brooks

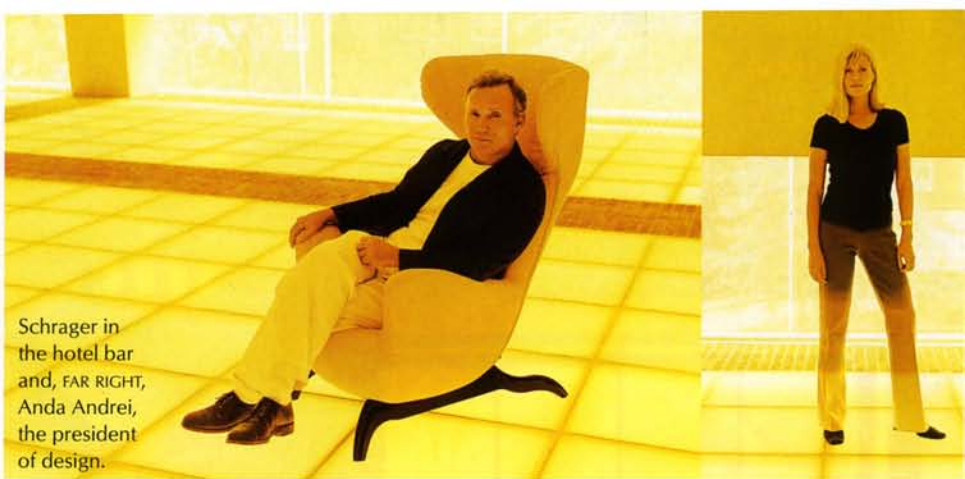


held up in transit from Germany because customs officials couldn't figure out what it was. The Hudson will occupy the former clubhouse of the American Women's Association, a massive building located on Fifty-eighth Street just off Ninth Avenue that was originally constructed in 1929 by J. P. Morgan's daughter. The structure is severe: 24 stories of red bricks and windows hewn into cubic buttes and canyons—the perfect foil for the \$125 million fantasy that Schrager and Starck will unveil this fall. The address reflects Schrager's penchant for "offbeat, askew" locations. Head east from here and things get swanky; go west and you're in the land of Moe's Deli and Grocery.

The Hudson is clearly intended to be young, fun, and cheap (the rooms start at \$95 a night) but also gorgeous—a reflection of Schrager's current philosophy that contemporary life is not about how much money you have but how much you know. "It's like an Ivy League college that's been invaded by E-kids," he says. Starck, reached at the Bordeaux oyster farm he retreats to in the summer, puts it more picturesquely: "It's as if you're a cyberkid and you go on holiday in the house of your English grandmother, who is a little strange because she takes acid." In other words, it's architecture as theater, a series of stage sets for the people Starck calls "our tribe," those who, whether in New York, London, Tokyo, or Milan, seek out a certain measure of style.

What this means in physical terms is big public rooms made from solid brick—a baronial library, a handsomely austere "refectory," a number of outside gardens, a grand bar—that feature a surreal collection of furniture Starck designed or found, illuminated floors, and a lot of glass in the bright yellow of a well-known French liqueur, its name rendered in Schrager's Brooklyn burr as "Shartrooz." The brick parts are mostly on the southern side of the building, the chartreuse-colored glass on the north; in between the two materials penetrate and interlock, as if engaged in a long, intricate kiss.

As with all of Schrager's other properties, the hotel's name is nowhere to be seen; you're expected to know what it is without asking. The entrance is located on Fifty-eighth Street—a spare, pale rectangular



Schrager in the hotel bar and, FAR RIGHT, Anda Andrei, the president of design.

door beneath a strip window that would stand squarely in the tradition of Le Corbusier were its clean lines not offset by the yellow of the glass, a set of bronze shutters, and a burning flame. (The last is an idea borrowed from the In and Out Club, a gentlemen's association in Piccadilly, London.) The strip window, located at the level of the floor of the bar on the second story, offers a fine view from the street of the lower halves of those mingling inside; this is not a place to go without well-considered footwear, or with untuned limbs.

You may enter through a low, discreet door, but henceforth you're in a riot of complexity, contradiction, and the magnificently perverse: It's both ultra-solid and ultraethereal, ultranatural and ultra-artificial, ultra-austere and ultrasensual. It's also sophisticated and childlike, a theme park for grown-ups, though when I mention Disney to Starck he bristles. "If you are not polite, we will terminate the interview," he retorts in his eloquent, French-flavored English. "Disney wants to make people stupid. We want to make them intelligent."

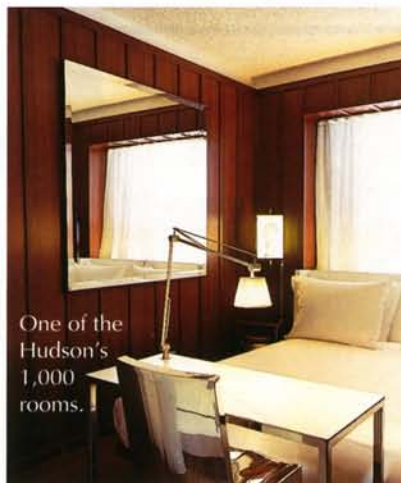
Once inside, you're flooded in a bath of yellow light, flanked by two of Starck's trademark bulbous columns, and presented with a choice of shops—Schrager eagerly says they will sell "the coolest sweatshirt, the coolest writing pen, the coolest books"—and a pair of inviting escalators. These take you up through a fluorescent-lit glass box that recalls a Dan Flavin sculpture and into the lobby. "When you arrive there," in Starck's words, "you are strangely in an English castle"—a brick-arched, ivy-tangled space that might be a corner of Harvard Yard, if not for the wood reception desk carved with Alice-in-Wonderland bas-reliefs of

sinuous trees and branches. To the right, a vast crystal chandelier hangs, and at this moment you are reminded of a Schrager saying about his time as the impresario of Studio 54: "Things were most spectacular when they were right on the edge of being tacky."

Just behind the front desk is the Hudson's "private park," a lush, leafy cleft in the hard-edged geometry of New York. It is the first of several gardens dotted about the hotel's roofs and terraces, in a contemporary take on Manhattan's long tradition of rooftop oases, from the mansions of Stanford White to Rockefeller Center and Trump Tower. At the Hudson the roof gardens will offer everything from hot tubs and lounging areas to poetry readings and concerts. From the lobby you can also reach the Hudson Bar, where the hotel's paradoxes become most intense: Brick columns float on a glass floor, and Starck-designed Queen Anne chairs upholstered in bright translucent silicon are scattered about. You can sit on an artistically modified log, African stools, a chair by Gaudí or the avant-garde Dutch designers Droog. A random selection of bricks are covered in gold leaf, which is like serving Lafite with hamburgers. The bar itself is veneered, ornate, and very long: It's as if Starck had gotten hold of some Louis Quinze DNA and genetically modified it to produce something weirder and spindlier than was ever dreamed of in eighteenth-century France. Across the low ceiling writhes a "phantas-



Clemente's face lampshade.



One of the Hudson's 1,000 rooms.



# BRICK-A-BRAC

The Hudson's dining hall-like restaurant. "It's like an Ivy League college that's been invaded by E-kids," Schrager says.







Stained-glass photographs by Jean Baptiste Mondino.



magoric" mural by Francesco Clemente.

The upper floors are more serene. In the bedrooms, tiny but brilliantly designed, intimacy meets infinity: Outside is the vastness of New York. Mirrors hung on opposite walls multiply the space. At the same time, a richly dark wood paneling creates a protective shell like a yacht's cabin floating on the ocean. The bathrooms have glass walls that extend the rooms further but can also be curtained off for privacy. And on each bedside table is a Clemente-painted face lampshade, which, Schrager says, provides "a little spirituality."

There's more—a spa, a gym, a swimming pool, a bowling alley, and even an archery court—but you will by now have gathered that Schrager's energy and Starck's fecundity of ideas are showing no signs of diminishing. It's been a decade and a half since the two first collaborated on the Paramount and Royalton hotels. In those days, Starck would arrange for a purring Harley to be waiting for him at JFK, so he could get off the Concorde and ride his bike straight into the heart of the hotel construction site. The two may have mellowed a bit, but Schrager describes working with Starck as "good sex—we understand each other completely." Starck concurs: "I am like a brother. Ian always has one." Close, long-lasting relationships are central to Schrager's way of working. The two men's shared belief is that what they do is not as much about trends or design or making money or selling people beds for the night as it is about emotion. "I am not trendy," says Starck. "I am very happy with that. I never was a designer: I am just a regular citizen who sees something that doesn't exist that can bring happiness or humor or just a touch of love."

"I cry when people call them designer hotels," says Schrager. "Design is just a tool to get a good vibration." His company may now be worth more than \$2 billion, but, he adds, "if you go for the money first, it's a perversion of the process."

Schrager's hip empire couldn't have been built without his handpicked team of specialists, which includes Michael Overington, (continued on page 539)





“It’s as if you’re a cyberkid and you go on holiday in the



**MELLOW  
YELLOW**

In the hotel bar,  
Starck's Queen  
Anne chair,  
upholstered in  
silicon, is mixed  
with other  
pieces of funky  
furniture.

house of your English grandmother, who takes acid"



## URBAN IDYLL

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the deceptively mild-looking president of the company who started as a janitor at Studio 54, and Anda Andrei, the bewitchingly dark-eyed president of design, who has worked on all of Schrager's hotels since the Royalton. "At the end of every project, I think no one will want to work with us again," says Andrei about the hectic nature of Schrager's ventures. For the Hudson, Schrager also brought in the garden-er Madison Cox, who felt the strain as the designer of the "private park." When I met him, he was rolling his eyes at Schrager's last-minute request for more trees. "More trees!" he exclaims. "The last ones took months to arrive. It's always hysteria, but that's the fun of it." No one connected with Schrager seems to want it any other way.

Schrager, who is 52, is almost insanely driven. When he was a boy, he says, it was basketball ("I was short"). Then it was Studio 54, the most famous nightclub in history. When that collapsed and he was sentenced for tax evasion, he educated himself about architecture in prison. Then it was hotels, and it will be something else in the future. He waves a postcard from his camping trip to Monument Valley and says, "We need more things like this in the city. I mean, look, I understand that it's a mountain, but why not?" He produces a photograph of the decoration-encrusted Khmer temple of Angkor Wat and says, "How about Angkor Wat? How about if we did something like that?" Schrager is not someone to be daunted by the impossible: Recently, he commissioned Rem Koolhaas and Jacques Herzog to design his next hotel in the city, on Astor Place. In its ambitions, this plan has about it the kind of daredevilry of his boast about Monument Valley, since Koolhaas and Herzog are two of the biggest talents, and egos, in the world of architecture. "Do you know what it's like making a schedule with these guys?" asks Schrager in mock exasperation.

The current designs the two have put together show a blunt spongiform pyramid, a sort of geometric meteorite hovering over a pavement-level swimming pool. Escalators descend through the water to a basement foyer whose ceiling is the glass bottom of the pool. It's extraordinary, unprecedented, and will be the most dramatic intervention on the streets of New York since Frank Lloyd Wright built the Guggenheim. "I learn," says Schrager. "That's learning for me: when I work with brilliant people.

"When I don't get a thrill out of hotels,"

he adds, "I'll go and do something else." But given the stunning exuberance of the Hudson and Schrager's grand plans for Astor Place, it would seem that the thrill is still a long way from being gone. □

## ESPRESSO EXPLAINED

(continued from page 507)

produce an underextracted cup. Comparing 224 combinations is humanly impossible if you don't want espresso to ruin your life, and maybe even if you do. Plus, you probably also want to know how well each machine steams milk. Forget about it.

I narrowed down the trials. I sent back the lever-operated La Pavoni. To test the E.S.E. machines, I used pods from Illy and Starbucks because these well represent the Italian and American ideas about blending and roasting.

And here are some conclusions:

1. The Saeco superautomatic often had an edge over the pod machines because it grinds the beans right before brewing them. It makes a fine crema that often supported a spoon of sugar for a record four seconds. The results, however, were quite inconsistent. I do not know how the Saeco stacks up against other superautomatic models; all are much more expensive than simple pod machines and contain plenty of mechanisms and electronics that can go haywire. The Saeco allows you to use any beans you wish and to fiddle with the fineness of the grind and the volume of the espresso. It is thus well suited to the espresso lover like me who likes to obsess, but only a little, and without getting his or her hands dirty.

2. The best single cup of espresso came from the Unic Pony, a heavy, all-metal semiprofessional machine that uses E.S.E. pods and was sent to me instead of the simpler, less expensive version I had wanted to test but which has not yet arrived from Europe. Using an Illy dark-roast pod, it produced the strong and incredible scent of jasmine, sip after sip. It was an epiphanous moment. When I drew another cupful, it was gone. The next day, it was still gone.

3. The Nespresso makes a nice cup of espresso nearly every time, with a good, thick crema. But you have to use Nespresso's own coffee and have no control over anything but how long you let the water flow through the pod. The most crucial flaw is that Nespresso uses only five grams of ground coffee. (Believe me—on two occasions, I took apart ten pods and weighed their aggregate contents.) This is not enough coffee—you can taste the dilution.

4. Two E.S.E. pod machines produced,

out of the box, as good espresso as anything I can make with beans, a burr grinder, and a bathroom scale. These were the La Pavoni (PL-16, \$359 suggested retail) and the Saeco (Via Veneto, \$179). Close behind were the Starbucks Barista (\$349, or \$399 for stainless steel), the Rancilio Silvia (\$395), and the Briel (ES200A) (\$499). I can give only a provisional recommendation to the Francis Francis!, my own espresso machine. Recently it has not been producing the proper amount and type of crema. One reason could be that its pump is turning out too little pressure. I had a brainstorm. What if I attached a small water-pressure meter to the spout at the center of the filter holder? After a few hours wasted at my hostile local hardware store, I telephoned Roy Forster, quality-assurance manager for Illy USA, for help. It turns out that he and his technicians use a water-pressure meter that mounts on the filter holders of professional machines, which contain powerful, adjustable, centrifugal pumps costing more than an entire home machine. With home machines, even fancy ones, either the pumps work right, he feels, or they don't work at all. But he sent me a pressure meter anyway, and I discovered that my Francis Francis! is not perfectly sealed, allows the pressure to escape, and thus presumably cannot properly emulsify enough of the oils! I believe that my wife, the least of whose countless virtues is mechanical aptitude, may have injured the machine a few months back when she chose brute force over dexterity to ram the filter basket into its holder while my back was turned. The screech of tearing metal still rings in my ears.

Have I forgotten to mention that the water you use is said to have a dramatic effect on the quality of the espresso, especially on its body? Hard water, water with more minerals, makes a thicker espresso, which contributes to the velvety texture and the long aftertaste. But even Illy and his laboratories have not figured out which minerals are important and just how hard the water should be. Forster loves the nearly brackish water in Scottsdale, Arizona, for making espresso. Illy prefers Los Angeles, where nearly everybody drinks bottled water because most tap water tastes so awful.

On my next trip to San Diego, I will have a list of experiments in hand. Out there I use bottled water even for Sky King, our incomparable golden retriever. The espresso should be magnificent. On the other hand, maybe I'll leave my experiments back in New York City. In San Diego the jasmine grows on trees. □