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ISSN 1040-2391
01/05 \$4.99 (US) \$5.99 (CAN)



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T+L June '05

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MANHATTAN MAKEOVER

NEW YORK'S CENTURY-OLD
ST. REGIS TAPPED STEPHEN WILLS AND JAMES
HUNIFORD TO DO A LONG-NEEDED
REFURBISHING, AND THE INTERIOR DESIGN
TEAM FOUND A WAY TO RECONNECT
WITH THE HOTEL'S ILLUSTRIOUS PAST
BY CHRISTOPHER PETKANAS
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Window Dressing Detail of a Sills
and Huniford room. Opposite: The St.
Regis's Beaux-Arts exterior.



VISUALLY CHALLENGED suburban office parks are not the natural habitat of top-drawer New York interior designers, who tend to prefer paneled Park Avenue drawing rooms filled with FFF (Fine French Furniture). And yet a big-box corporate headquarters in Westchester County is where Stephen Sills and James Huniford found themselves in February 2004, trying earnestly to persuade a conference room full of managers—many of them tough, number-crunching suits who wouldn't know Louis XV from Louis L'Amour—that they should be hired to redesign the guest rooms of one of the most historic and patrician hotels in the country.

With so much at stake, from image to cost per key (the price at which each renovated room is delivered) to the judgment guests will ultimately hand down, all such presentations in the hospitality business are fraught with expectancy. But because Sills and Huniford are so, well, famous (Tina Turner, sundry Rockefellers, and *Vogue's* Anna Wintour have been clients), and because they had never worked on a hotel before, the atmosphere at their show-and-tell was unusually loaded.

Sills and Huniford got two things immediately right in the renderings they pitched for Manhattan's St. Regis Hotel, the 1904 Beaux-Arts flagship—built by John Jacob Astor—of Starwood Hotels & Resorts' silk-socking St. Regis brand. They contained no orange and no monkeys. (Barry Sternlicht, Starwood's executive chairman and chief design officer, and the man with the final word on who is chosen to marry lamp to lamp shade, abhors orange and anything to do with monkeys.) Instead, Sills and Huniford offered room schemes in their signature burnished golds and buttery yellows, and in a silvery mix of soft greens and blues. Sternlicht and his ebullient design lieutenant Ellen O'Neill, a 13-year veteran of Ralph Lauren's home furnishings divi-

sion, could not help but notice how respectful the schemes were of the St. Regis's pedigree, and how eloquently they waved the flag for traditional decorating—decorating that, if all you knew of the world was hotels that postdate the Delano, you might be forgiven for thinking was dead.

Tufted sofas, fringed ottomans, crystal column lamps, vases lifted from a Morandi still life, velvet hopsack, straw cloth, ticking stripes glamorously reimagined in taffeta: These were the elements Sills and Huniford used to make their case for the St. Regis, which had last been redone in 1991 and was looking, to put it generously, triste. Their residential approach also had the advantage of re-connecting the landmark to its past, to a time when people actually lived at the hotel. Suites customized by Elsie de Wolfe, the William S. Paleys, Cecil Beaton, and David Hicks are some of the 20th century's most iconic interiors.

"For the architecture and quality of the craftsmanship, the St. Regis is the finest hotel in New York," says Sills, who signs off on the reopening of 56 rooms this month, the remaining 200 to be rolled out by early fall. "The secret to the success of what we contributed is the fragile subtlety of the colors and textures."

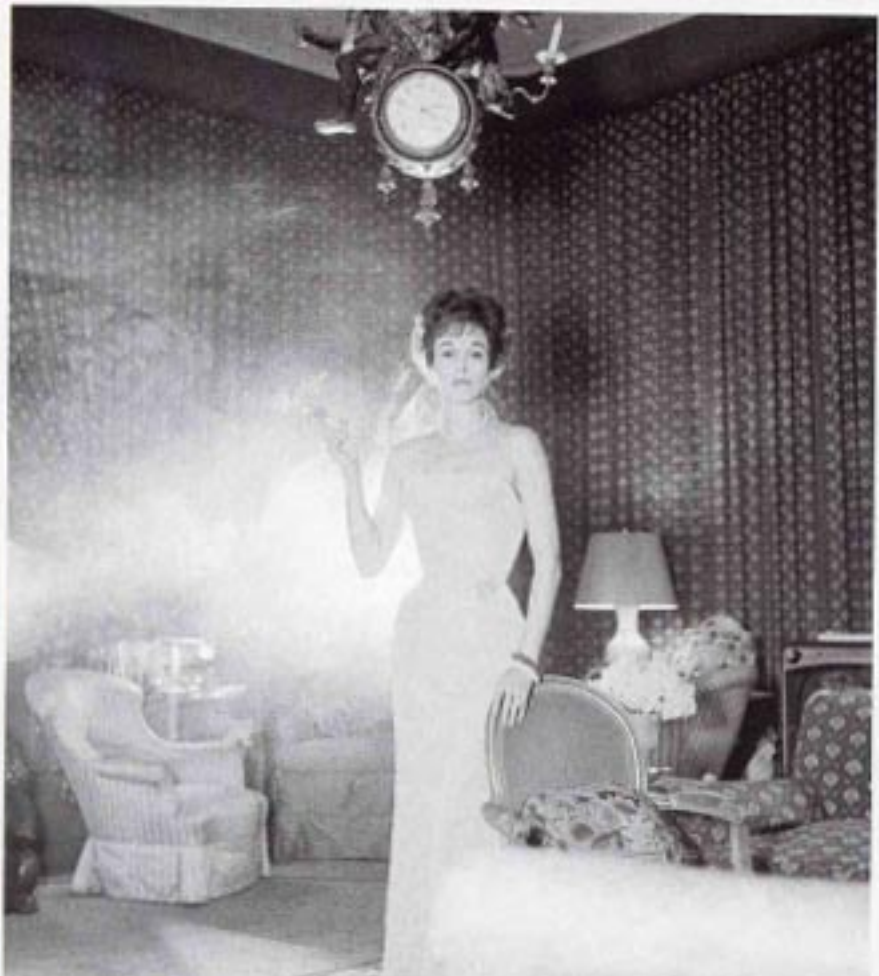
"This was incredibly rarefied for a commercial project," adds Huniford. "What you see is what we designed. Nothing was watered down."

Though one might have hoped for a higher shoosh factor, the refurbished rooms have a confidential apartment-like feel that will allow travelers to live, if only for one night, that most enduring of fantasies: a Manhattan pied-à-terre of one's own. As with frozen chicken pot pies, the leveling imperatives of brand building in the hotel industry usually result in a dull, insipid product. But the St. Regis may be the exception that confirms the rule. You like crackle glaze or you don't, but Sills and Huniford's handsome new secretaries and television cabinets do not, at least superficially, have an industrial

Elegant by Design Clockwise from top left: A St. Regis doorman in action; a room brightened by Sills and Huniford's signature yellows; the legendary Babe Paley in her St. Regis apartment, in the late fifties; another view of the Sills and Huniford-decorated suite.



TOP RIGHT: © ROBERT LORENZ/SHOOTING STAR PICTURES; BOTTOM RIGHT: © STEPHEN SILLS





THE NEW ROOMS AT THE ST. REGIS HAVE A CONFIDENTIAL APARTMENT-LIKE FEEL THAT WILL ALLOW TRAVELERS TO LIVE AN ENDURING FANTASY—A MANHATTAN PIED-À-TERRE OF ONE'S OWN



House Seat Cocktail time at
the hotel's King Cole Bar. Opposite:
The Grand Luxe Suite.



look, even though they were in fact produced by the hundreds. The rooms are filled with linear miles of sexy welting, luxurious trims, and—in place of the reproduction Chinese export porcelain you see everywhere else—things you might genuinely want to own, like one of those elegant buttoned robes. The only thing you get

nishing one of her hotels. O'Neill, who confesses to a career-long enslavement to tear sheets, typically bombards hopefuls with images—or "moments," as she calls them—that provide small imagined details as to the identity of the guest. "I want to know, Who stays in this room? What car do they drive? What bag do



The newly decorated Fifth Avenue Suite by Huniford and Sills, left. Above: Elsie de Wolfe, a forerunner of interior design, in 1941. De Wolfe, a.k.a. Lady Mendel, furnished her own St. Regis abode in the 30's.

(Continued from page 209) "hardscape" materials like stone and tile—because Barry likes to play. Aparia Design, which last year won the bid for the Centre for Well-Being at the Phoenix in Scottsdale, hacked off a piece of Camelback Mountain just so they could show us their color inspiration. That's the kind of thing we love."

It would be more exciting to be able to report that the race for the St. Regis was won by a thread, but that was not the case; Sills and Huniford's renderings simply blew Siegel's away. Contracts were signed, though Sternlicht says he would have broken them if he had not been happy after the model room went up. In the event, he was ecstatic. "I wanted the room to read as rich and expensive, and it did."

Sills says the old style Zeuses who famously set up housekeeping in New York hotels, including Cole Porter at the rival Waldorf Astoria, were always in the back of his mind when he was working on the St. Regis, giving him something to live up to. Elsie de Wolfe (Lady Mendel), the steel magnolia credited with inventing the métier of interior designer, was handed a St. Regis apartment in the thirties for a derisory rate in exchange for her furnishing it (with ravishing antiques and objets de vertu that dealers loaned her and she sold on com-

mission), entertaining her well-connected friends in it, and making sure she and her lair were photographed. Everybody got their money's worth when de Wolfe's living room—lavished with the fern pattern that was her trademark—landed on the cover of *House & Garden* in 1941.

"If Elsie was feeling restless and moved to another suite," Jane S. Smith wrote in her biography of de Wolfe, "that was quite all right with the management, since they would raise the rents on the rooms she had vacated, knowing they could command a premium for anything decorated by the Lady Mendel."

The extravagantly chic Babe Paley was so in love with the fantasy sitting room Billy Baldwin spun for her at the St. Regis in the fifties that she hired Sister Parish and Albert Hadley to re-create it when she moved uptown. What becomes a legend most? Tented walls, a needlepoint carpet stitched with blackmoor heads, and a 19th-century Venetian chandelier incorporating a chinoiserie clock.

A swooning press account remembers the suite Cecil Beaton confected in 1967 for its "light biscuit walls... Tangerine velvet draperies and specially woven Axminster sulphur yellow carpeting... of course, his own paintings on the walls,

[and] jars of laurel leaves at the windows." Heady stuff. After noting that all of the hotel furniture had been upholstered in white, the writer concluded with a reproving flourish that must have elicited a laugh from Beaton, "[This] suite is not for small children!"

Three years later, David Hicks stole Beaton's thunder with an apartment he zapped with modern chromed aluminum bookshelves, bleached antelope skulls on Perspex pedestals, a mica coffee table, and a baldachin bed in one of his trademark geo-florals. The bathroom was a blizzard of interlocking H's. Logo sheets Hicks was then designing for J.P. Stevens were used for the shower curtain, wall covering, vanity skirt, folding screen, and more.

Like Beaton's suite, Hicks's was put into the inventory of accommodations to let when he was not in residence, an arrangement that ended in tears when one day at check-in he was told that Liza Minnelli was in his room, and would he mind taking another? You bet he would. Hicks, who had a monstrously high opinion of himself and was nothing if not grand (his widow is the queen's cousin), turned promptly on the balls of his well-shod feet, marched out of the hotel, and never returned.

Unfortunately, Hicks and even full-timers like the Paleys were never invited to purchase their St. Regis digs, a policy Starwood has rethought: For the first time, you can actually own a piece of the hotel, in the form of a condo. Sills and Huniford are sweetening the deal by investing many of the units with the same courtly mien as the guest rooms.

But how to explain the rooms' new paisley carpets? Paisley is another Sternlicht bugaboo. There are three possible scenarios. One is that Sills and Huniford are trying to put one over on Sternlicht (unlikely). The second is that he is so enchanted with their work he is even willing to accept a motif he normally finds indigestible (doubtful). The last is that the paisley is so small and out of focus, Sternlicht never noticed it. ✦

ST. REGIS HOTEL, 2 E. 55th St., New York; 800/759-7550 or 212/753-4500; www.stregis.com; doubles from 1745.