A guest room at Casa Cody in Palm Springs. Photo: Josh Cho

Need to Know

How to Land—and Survive—Your First Hotel Project

From designers who have lived to tell the tale

By Jessica Ritz

June 9, 2021

Like so many pivotal professional experiences, snagging a first hotel client might come down to being in the right place at the right time—but you're better off being strategic.

AD PRO talked with experts in the field about breaking into the hotel design game—and pulling it off. Venice, California, firm Electric Bowery made the transition from residential and restaurant work to splashy hotels, taking on such commissions as the longtime in-progress Wildflower Farms for the Auberge Resorts Collection in the Hudson Valley, the recent Casa Cody revamp in Palm Springs, plus various projects for boutique hotel owner/operator Casetta and Silver Lake Pool & Inn (part of the Palisociety group). Robbyn Carter, a former partner at powerhouse international firm Hirsch Bedner Associates, launched her firm Studio Carter in early 2020, opening offices in Los Angeles, Singapore, and Amsterdam. She now works around the globe with hotel brands including the Fairmont, W, and Mondrian.

Know your strengths

"It's important to have an authentic viewpoint of yourself and your studio, and it's better to work with clients who have that same mindset," says Carter. That might mean saying a very scary word: no. "Don't be afraid to turn down the client if you don't feel it's right," she adds.

Consider starting small

You might not get a big project right away, but other design experience can help you win down the line. Carter recalls a designer colleague who was hired specifically to complete a pool area for a hotel, for instance, and is now overseeing entire luxury resorts. "I believe anything is possible. You have to have dedication and be patient getting there," she says.

The Winter's House at Casa Cody. Photo: Josh Cho

Build a relationship with owners as early as possible

"It's great to start with them from the beginning if possible, and work with the same hotel client on multiple projects," Bartholomew notes, pointing to Electric Bowery's relationship with the growing enterprise Casetta, for example. With that brand, the design team is mindful about being "consistent throughout" while also treating projects individually and contextually. (What resonates in Palm Springs may not be right for Taos.) Electric Bowery also carefully considers the "more subtle" touchpoints, says Bartholomew.

"Projects are like relationships," Carter says. "If you're happy, you're going to do well."

Get to know the dynamics between owners and operators

Navigating the relationships among hotel developers, owners, and operators can be tricky. It's often up to the designer to "make sure that ship is steering in the right direction for the brand and owner," Carter advises. Sometimes the owner and operator will be one and the same, but that is less often the case. It's essential to parse the differences.

The king suite at Silver Lake Pool & Inn. Photo: Palisociety

Be ready to "conduct an orchestra"

"There are so many facets, from key plans to dealing with all the different consultants," says Carter, who adds that designers act almost like conductors in an orchestra. This juggling act is true of most architecture and design efforts, but is even more the case when it comes to bigger hospitality campuses. It's essential, then, to spend time learning the ropes and finding a mentor who "has a strong knowledge of how these components work," especially on a larger scale. Patience, understanding, and respect must carry through to interactions with the huge range of professions within hospitality development, whether it's real estate executives or branding agencies.

To illustrate the industry's interconnectedness, Bartholomew points to the narrative her creative team devises: In the end, it is a through line that impacts every stage and aspect of a project, from early concept meetings to printed materials.

The pool deck at Silver Lake Pool & Inn. Photo: Palisociety