

BOUTIQUE design

HOSPITALITY REINVENTED

NOVEMBER | 2015



DYNAMIC DUO

JOHN PRITZKER AND NIKI LEONDAKIS
COMMUNE HOTELS + RESORTS

BOUTIQUE DESIGN contents

NOVEMBER 2015
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John Pritzker, Geolo Capital,
and Niki Leondakis,
Commune Hotels + Resorts.
Photo: Paul Dyer

FROM THE editor

CONNECTING WITH COMMUNE

IT'S NOT EVERY day I get to interview a billionaire. Actually, I'm not sure I've ever interviewed one before! But John Pritzker, chairman of Commune Hotels + Resorts and founder of private equity fund Geolo Capital, clearly fills that bill: he's ranked No. 293 on the current Forbes 400 list of the wealthiest Americans, with an estimated net worth of \$2.3 billion.

However, you can't put a price on passion, and Pritzker's enthusiasm for the hotel business came through loud and clear during the Q+A I conducted with him and his hand-picked ceo at Commune, Niki Leondakis. (See page 56.) Pritzker—who started out working for his family's Hyatt Hotels Corp. but has been doing his own thing for nearly three decades now—really relishes talking about the lifestyle-focused hotels that Commune specializes in under its Joie de Vivre, Thompson, tommie and Alila brands.

That enthusiasm came through strongest in the comments he made about the Chicago Athletic Association (CAA) hotel, which is housed in a long-neglected gem that Commune has brought back to vivid life. "I grew up in Chicago, so I'm fairly conversant on the city's architecture and history, and this is one of those places that, if there's 30 boxes to check off, it hit all 30," he says. "It's huge—240,000 sq. ft.—and has everything from an enormous swimming pool to a gym with a mahogany running track above the basketball court. Our view was, how do we activate all of these spaces, so that people get a sense of what this club was once intended to be, yet in a way that is appropriate to 2015? That was the real fun of that project."

Speaking of fun, Pritzker notes with pride that he named the restaurant atop the CAA hotel "Cindy's," in honor of his mother. "So I

even got some points with her for this project," he says. While the CAA hotel represented a labor of love for Pritzker, Leondakis notes that it also demonstrated that similar high-profile adaptive-reuse projects "are in the wheelhouse" for Geolo and Commune.

As evidence of the CAA hotel's impact on the industry, it has been chosen as a finalist in the 35th annual Gold Key Award for Excellence in Hospitality Design, in the best hotel upscale category. Winners in that competition will be unveiled at an awards gala on Nov. 9 at the Waldorf Astoria, which will cap off our sixth annual Boutique Design New York (BDNY) trade fair/conference. (The winners will also be profiled in the December issue of *Boutique Design*.)

Speaking of BDNY, this issue contains two stories illustrating just why you can't afford to miss this year's iteration of our East Coast fair, which takes place Nov. 8-9 at the Javits Convention Center. First up is BD executive editor Mary Scoviak's preview of the signature "Power Players: Women Leaders in Hospitality" breakfast and panel discussion, co-sponsored by NEWH (page 156). After that, starting on page 180, is BD assistant editor Christina Green's wonderful sampling of the products that will take center stage on the Javits floor. I encourage you to explore both—and then show up at the show!



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STAY CONNECTED WITH

BOUTIQUE DESIGN



Q+A

DYNAMIC DUO

John Pritzker and Niki Leondakis are tapping their special skills to build a global portfolio that seeks to rid the world of boring hotels.

INTERVIEW BY MATTHEW HALL

JOHN PRITZKER, board chairman at Commune Hotels + Resorts, got out of the hospitality business once. He vows not to do so again.

"I don't play golf. I don't play gin rummy—this is what I do," says Pritzker, whose exit from the hotel business occurred in 1988, when he left his family's company, the Hyatt Hotels Corp., to pursue several entrepreneurial activities, including becoming a founding member of Ticketmaster. "Hospitality is too much fun; it's too interesting. As a result, we're 'patient' money. We're not just in it for five years and out. We're in it for the long term."

The "we," in this case, includes both Commune and Geolo Capital, the private equity fund that Pritzker created in 2005 and subsequently used in 2010 to buy a controlling interest in Jole de Vivre (JdV), an eclectic boutique hotel soft brand. The following year, Geolo merged JdV with the luxury lifestyle Thompson Hotels brand and created San Francisco-based Commune as a parent company to oversee the two brands.

Then, in 2012, Pritzker persuaded longtime Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants' executive Niki Leondakis to join Commune as its ceo. (That move earned Leondakis a spot on *Boutique Design's* "Game Changers" roster early the next year.)



JOHN PRITZKER AND NIKI LEONDAKIS
COMMUNE HOTELS + RESORTS

PAUL DYER



TOMMIE HUDSON SQUARE

Since then, Pritzker and Leondakis have worked to integrate and expand JdV and Thompson, while also launching two other major initiatives: the creation of tommie, a micro lifestyle brand whose first two locales will open next year in New York, and the integration of Singapore-based Alila Hotels & Resorts as Commune's fourth brand. In addition, Commune recently opened the Chicago Athletic Association hotel, a true labor of love for Pritzker (it's in his hometown) that both say serves as a model for similar one-off, specialty properties in the future.

So, how did this powerful partnership come about, where do Leondakis and Pritzker plan to take Commune, and what do their ambitions mean for the design community? Leondakis and Pritzker shared their views on those topics (and much more) in an exclusive joint interview with *Boutique Design*. Here's what he said/she said:

HOW DID YOUR PATHS FIRST CROSS?

JOHN: After we bought Joie de Vivre, we wanted to see if there was anything else that might be interesting to do with other existing platforms, and that included Kimpton. So I sat in this

conference room with [Geolo managing general partner] Tom Gottlieb and four or five guys from Kimpton and Niki. Most of the time the guys were talking, Niki was looking at her watch. But the three or four times she piped up with something, it was very impressive. As we were leaving the room, I turned to Gottlieb and said, "I want her." So, we pursued Niki, who had a reputation for excellence and innovation within the industry, and that's how we ended up together.

NIKI: When John first contacted me about possibly joining Commune, I was more curious about what this merger between JdV and Thompson hotels was going to look like. But the more I talked with him, the more I realized he had a passion for the business that was very much aligned with mine. It was a vision of running a company where we were creative and doing things differently, taking some risks, innovating with a new brand and a passion for hotels and the way they're conceived and operated.

WHAT ROLE DOES DESIGN PLAY IN CREATING THE LIFESTYLE PROPERTIES COMMUNE SPECIALIZES IN, AND HOW IS THAT ROLE CHANGING?

COURTESY OF TOMMIE HOTELS

CHICAGO ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION HOTEL



JOHN: It used to be that design was the be-all/end-all of that process. For example, when I was a kid at Hyatt, we would hire a Howard Hirsch and Michael Bedner, and they would say here's your design, and we'd tweak this and we'd tweak that, but that was the deal. We almost worked backward from design.

But now, people are looking for design that's more entrenched in the location, that has more to do with the programming of the hotel. So I think that what we've found is that it's a much more of a collaborative process than it used to be. That's probably pushed the design community to do more, because it's more nuanced than it used to be. Designers now have to accommodate more than just "the lobby should look like this." Now they have to be aware of what all goes on in the lobby, and make it look authentic to both the spirit of the hotel and its location. Frankly, I roll my eyes when I hear it anymore, but I think we were in the vanguard of this whole notion of experiential stays.

NIKI: I would add that general consumers and travelers, alike, are much more attuned to the nuances of design—they pay a lot

more attention to it. I liken it to the wine industry, where people have become much more sophisticated in their tastes since the 1980s or '90s. I think design has undergone a similar evolution. People are not just looking for a hotel that has great design, but they want to understand the point of view of that design, how that design relates to the location, how that design was conceived and the story behind it. In addition, I think developers, operators and owners like ourselves are much more attuned to guests' emotional connections to our properties. So now it's no longer about the design looking cool; it's more about, how does the design make the guest feel?

JOHN: There's almost a neuro-biological aspect to it. For example, it was a terrible winter when we opened the Thompson Chicago. We'd gone out somewhere, and when we came back into the hotel, the fire was roaring, the lights were dim and I remember thinking I was walking into some kind of urban ski chalet. I don't drink, but I nonetheless thought to myself, wouldn't it be lovely to have a hot toddy here?

COURTESY OF CHICAGO ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION HOTEL

In a similar vein, that's why, at the Chicago Athletic Association hotel, we put a pommel horse at the end of the bed, instead of a bench. In any other hotel, people would have gone, WTF? There, people walk in and say, "That is so cute!" Not only is it cute, it's authentic and functional. We call it "The Big Wink." When guests walk into a hotel room and see something that makes them say, "That works," what they're really saying is, "Wow, they really thought about this."

LET'S TALK NEXT ABOUT YOUR GROWTH PLANS FOR COMMUNE'S FOUR BRANDS. LET'S START WITH TOMMIE. WHAT THAT BRAND WILL BRING TO THE MARKET THAT HASN'T BEEN SEEN BEFORE?

NIKE: We think that there is a significant opportunity in the market for an affordable, design-savvy micro-lifestyle hotel brand. Tommie is filling a gap for an affordable hotel that both appeals to youthful travelers—the millennials and Gen Y—as well as the widespread psychographic of discerning travelers who are of means, youthfully minded, but are also budget conscious. They don't want to pay for things that they don't care about. They're looking for more of an experience; for them, the definition of luxury is different than the traditional definition of luxury.

HOW SO?

That traditional definition typically involved stuff in the rooms: five-fixture bathrooms, thousand-count thread sheets, things like that. But the tommie traveler cares more about what they're going to do when they travel, what they're going to experience while they travel, versus what they have. So, tommie has a very compact room, and the emphasis is on the experience and the programming in the public areas. That includes such things as a listening library with great headphones and lots of music options that can be shared—that kind of alone/together syndrome in a public space—as well as courtyard and rooftop lounge, a 24-hour general store where we offer locally sourced artisanal items from snacks to craft kits, and a full-service restaurant and bar experience.

JOHN: There are some really interesting tricks that come to mind with tommie. I don't mean that in a deceptive way, but in a small room, things like floor-to-ceiling windows are critical to giving the space more depth and a larger feel. So, I think that's also pushed the design community to do something that they hadn't considered before.

WHAT'S UP WITH TOMMIE'S BIG BROTHER, THOMPSON?

NIKE: The biggest news here is our expansion of Thompson into the resort market. We opened The Cape, a Thompson Hotel, in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, in June, and we're opening our second resort in the country in Playa del Carmen in November.

While we'll continue to grow Thompson in urban hotel markets, we think there's a real opportunity in resort markets to do lifestyle hotels. Both our new resorts have a nice combination of the restaurant, bar and nightlife programming that Thompson is so well known for, along with a design point of view that



THOMPSON PLAYA DEL CARMEN



J. PARKER ROOFTOP RESTAURANT, HOTEL LINCOLN

COURTESY OF THOMPSON HOTELS (THOMPSON PLAYA DEL CARMEN); COURTESY OF JOIE DE VIVRE HOTELS (J. PARKER)



ALILA SEMINYAK

COURTESY OF ALILA HOTELS AND RESORTS (ALILA SEMINYAK); COURTESY OF TOMMIE HOTELS (TOMMIE HUDSON SQUARE)

combines mid-century modern with local Mexican flavor.

The lobby of the Cabo resort, for example, has a replica of a giant, life-size whale that was made by a local artisan out of driftwood that was collected after Hurricane Odile hit that area last year. So, it's got this wonderful blend of local, heritage artistry, with a modern, urban design approach. Nobody's doing anything like it in Cabo. While a lot of the hotels there are beautiful, they all have a similar, Spanish Colonial point of view. This is radically different, and there are a lot of similar opportunities in other resort markets to do the same thing.

WHAT ABOUT JOIE DE VIVRE?

NIKE: We've been busy expanding JdV from being a mostly regional, West Coast group to a national brand with an East Coast presence. We just opened The Hall in Miami Beach, and we have several other hotels in development on the East Coast, including 50 Bowery in New York's Chinatown, which opens in the spring, and another one in Times Square, which is set to debut in 2016. In addition, we have a property under development in New Orleans. Beyond becoming a fully national brand, we think it has a lot of legs to grow internationally.

We've also evolved the JdV brand to have a more a specific point of view. It's still a collection, meaning it's a soft brand that allows for a ton of flexibility with each individual hotel having its own identity and standing as a brand of one. But The Epiphany Hotel in Palo Alto and the Hotel Lincoln in Chicago, which are both huge successes, represent the vision for the future of JdV, with their carefully calibrated local appeal.

JOHN – I think a quick story about the Hotel Lincoln will



TOMMIE HUDSON SQUARE



THE CAPE, A THOMPSON HOTEL

illustrate what Niki means. That hotel has a rooftop bar and restaurant and we were grappling with what to call it. In the spirit of how we think of ourselves, we wound up naming it the J. Parker. He [J. Parker] was Lincoln's bodyguard and was across the street drinking when the President was assassinated. So, we took a neighborhood-oriented hotel and layered on history and fun, quirky stuff and it became a destination. People are totally endeared to the hotel. My sister lives not far from the hotel, and she won't get her coffee anywhere but at the Elaine's Coffee Call that's located within the hotel. That's the home-run for us; when the local community adopts a place.

WHAT'S UP NEXT FOR ALILA?

NIKI: We're looking to bring that concept to the U.S. We think there's a real market here for a luxury lifestyle brand that mixes a really beautiful Zen sort of appeal with a modern aesthetic. And it's also continuing to expand in Asia. We have one Alila hotel that just opened in Bali, one in Jakarta that is opening in November, and the brand's first China hotel, which will open in the first quarter in 2016, in Anji. Alila has another dozen hotels in its pipeline, in Asia and the Middle East. And we're working with the relationships we've developed through Alila to bring Thompson, JdV and, ultimately, tommie to Asia.

WE TALKED EARLIER ABOUT THE CHICAGO ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION HOTEL. HOW DOES IT FIT INTO THE OVERALL PICTURE AT COMMUNE—IS IT A ONE-OFF OR DO YOU PLAN TO DO MORE LIKE IT?

NIKI: It is a brand of one, but we are thinking projects like this are in the wheelhouse for Geolo and Commune.

JOHN: Agreed. In winter 2016, in fact, we're opening The Beekman Hotel in Lower Manhattan. It's a Thompson hotel and its opening in some ways will represent the New



COURTESY OF THOMPSON HOTELS (THE CAPE); COURTESY OF JOIE DE VIVRE (HOTEL LINCOLN)



THE HALL, MIAMI BEACH



THOMPSON HOLLYWOOD

York version of the Chicago Athletic Association hotel. Beyond that, we're looking at another property in New York that's the same type of opportunity. So, ironically, it turns out that this kind of project is becoming one of our strong suits. Not only are we willing to do them if they come along, we're actively looking for them, because I think people now have an appreciation for what was.

That's also great for the design community. I use the cliché, but it truly is back to the future: how do you accommodate what was, how do you honor craftsmanship and yet add in elements so that it's comfortable by today's standards? That's a different challenge for the design community, and our experience is they rub their hands together and dive in, because these are few and far between.

LET'S CLOSE BY TALKING ABOUT A COUPLE OF BIG-PICTURE ISSUES IN THE HOTEL SECTOR. ONE MAJOR DEVELOPMENT HAS BEEN THE INFLUX OF FOREIGN DOLLARS INTO THE U.S. HOTEL MARKET. THAT INCLUDES GEOLO RECENTLY TEAMING WITH CHINA'S WANXIANG AMERICAN REAL ESTATE GROUP TO INVEST UP TO \$1 BILLION IN U.S. LUXURY HOTELS. ARE DEALS LIKE THAT IMPACTING THE DESIGN OF THE PROJECTS THEMSELVES?

JOHN: That's an interesting question: I hadn't really thought about it before. That said, the short answer is no, not in our experience, at least so far. One of the main reasons that Wanxiang came and partnered with us is because they like what we are doing. More than anything, we think of it as a vote of confidence for what we do and how we do it.

COURTESY OF JOIE DE VIVRE HOTELS (THE HALL); COURTESY OF THOMPSON HOTELS (THOMPSON HOLLYWOOD)



THE CAPE, A THOMPSON HOTEL

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW ON HOW AIRBNB AND OTHER SHARING ECONOMY SERVICES ARE IMPACTING THE HOTEL SECTOR?

NIKI: From a user-experience standpoint, I think companies like Airbnb have something to teach us, in terms of using technology to make it easier for our guests to do such things as book a reservation and give feedback. So, I'm really looking at that as a model for how we can use technology to improve our guest interaction.

JOHN: I was never one who felt that Airbnb was the end of the world as we know it. It's very clever, it's a different mousetrap, but it really doesn't inform or direct us in any way. But Niki is right—the technology is something we can learn from. Aside from that, I think what's going to be interesting about Airbnb over the long haul is that as its demographic ages, I suspect they're going to want more full-service opportunities like those offered by hotels.

ANYTHING I DIDN'T ASK THAT YOU HOPED I WOULD?

NIKI: One thing that I'd like to stress to your audience is the importance of coming up with truly creative restaurants, bars and nightclubs within hotels. Especially in lifestyle hotels like ours, those venues have become destinations in and of themselves.

So, I'm glad to see that hotel designers are either hiring restaurant experts as part of their team, or are becoming more specific in their understanding of what it takes to do restaurant design right. I say that because I've seen my fair share of restaurant design where silly things happen, like the chair height and the table height don't work together. As a result, people are bumping their knees, and it's clear that the design team didn't have restaurant or bar functionality in mind when they approached this. That just shouldn't happen. ●



CINDY'S RESTAURANT, CHICAGO ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION HOTEL

COURTESY OF THOMPSON HOTELS (THE CAPE); COURTESY OF CHICAGO ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION HOTEL (CINDY'S)