



The Long Goodbye

The brief was challenging, the solution perfect,
but still the designer had to walk away

Perhaps the old Jimmy Durante song put it best: “Did you ever have the feeling that you wanted to go, and still have the feeling that you wanted to stay?” When, and under what conditions, should an architect make the difficult choice to walk away from a job—especially if that job fulfills a cherished lifelong ambition?

A new client called my office in January, recommended by a common acquaintance. Would I be interested, he wondered, in designing the interiors of a new business hotel in midtown Manhattan? *Interested!* I had dreamed of designing a hotel ever since I had wandered the corridors of grand hotels in Amsterdam, London, and Milan on childhood trips to Europe and spent hours in their lobbies, absorbed by the passing parade of guests and rituals of the staff. In 1983, a colleague and I published an article in the newly revived *Vanity Fair* about an “ultimate hotel”—an assemblage of great hotel settings and celebrated guests from distant times and places. Years later, I directed the land-use approvals process for the Mercer, an André Balazs hotel in New York’s Soho district; part of my role was to evoke the romance of the small, specialized hotel to gain the enthusiastic support of skeptical community boards. Yes, I would be interested.

The first project meetings were something of a whirlwind, for, as it turned out, the hotel was well into construction: an existing eight-story mid-block structure, built in 1907, was rapidly being carved into 143 guestrooms. The owner, a genial New England developer, who, with his son, had personally designed his earlier projects—traditional inns and small hotels in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Florida—was now taking his first leap into the style-



Alternative layout for a single guest room. In this constrained arrangement—the room measures just 10 by 11 feet—the spacer element (to the right of the bed) is widened and the bureau and writing desk combined into one unit.

conscious, competitive New York market and felt the need for professional help. He was not at all interested, he quickly declared, in imitating the flashy “Eurotrash” look of several recent designer hotels in midtown—and was visibly relieved when I told him I wasn’t either. The goal, we agreed, was to create the modern-day equivalent of a classic Manhattan business hotel like the Algonquin: a place not of extreme luxury but of solid comfort—warm, substantial, urbane.

It would be a challenge. The project’s budget was tight, the schedule tighter (calling for an opening just seven months away), and many of the individual room layouts—frankly maximizing the number of beds that could be crammed into the existing floor plates—were small, dark, and awkwardly shaped. (No two rooms in the building, the owner cheerfully acknowledged, were exactly alike.) The rushed timetable ruled out any custom architectural work, while the limited budget all but guaranteed that a traditional approach would result not in gracious, distinctive interiors but in bland, utterly conventional hotel rooms.

One bright note was the appearance (at the owner’s invitation) of a Canadian furniture manufacturer who could turn out high-quality wood pieces of any design in short order and at relatively low cost. This began to suggest to me a promising solution: a “kit-of-parts” approach, in which individual pieces would lock together to create a consistent look, easily varied from one room to another. The incised grid pattern and bull-nose cap on each bed’s backboard, for example, would be continued by a similar backboard behind each side table, a continuity that would begin to suggest traditional wainscoting. A wood “frame” of the same height and material, meanwhile, would wrap around each bureau, writing desk, and television stand, locking those elements into the overall design. A “spacer” element—a wall piece laid out in multiples of the 9-inch-square incised grid—would accommodate large-scale variations from one room type to another, while a lapped reveal, capable of expanding or contracting by several inches, would accommodate finer-scale variations within each room type. This framework of interlocking pieces would be enhanced by a stylish but moderately priced selection of wall and window

It was an ideal solution, I thought, to the project’s constraints of budget, time, and pre-determined room layouts. No custom on-site work would be necessary; the pieces would be made in Ontario, shipped down to New York, and installed in place—some actually clipped together, others simply placed side by side. Traditional in mood and ambience, contemporary in line, it would meet the client’s stated desire for a classic, comfortable design that appealed to a younger, style-conscious audience. Indeed, as the design developed, I began to think that I had stumbled onto something larger: an innovative, affordable way to give medium-budget business hotels a sense of dignity and style.

From the start, however, it was clear the owner didn’t see it that way. Though he plainly appreciated certain aspects of the design—the spacer element and lapped reveal seemed especially to appeal to him—it quickly became obvious that the “look” he was after was, in the end, a traditional one, and no amount of verbal suasion could convince him otherwise.

It was the moment of truth. As an earnest student of classical architecture, I knew I could provide him with better-than-average traditional interiors. Perhaps at an earlier time in my career I would have done so, satisfied to gain the substantial experience (and compensation) of a large-scale hotel project. But my work is heading in a very different direction—toward a “friendly modernism” that is openly informed by the wisdom of traditional design and imbued with a certain sense of narrative richness. Moreover, my office is busy with other, more fulfilling projects, and I could sense only endless hours of frustration and argument ahead. I declined to offer any alternative scheme to the client, who (after promptly paying us for the completed work) went on to work with someone else.

Needless to say, it was not an easy decision—letting go of a desirable, high-profile project that also, as it happened, embodied a childhood dream. In a sense, it was a mark of worldly success that I had the freedom to do so—to forgo work that (whatever its other rewards) would not help me advance a larger design agenda. I still feel our approach was the right one—and hope eventually to employ a version of it elsewhere. Sometimes it is better to walk away. In any case, I still love hotels.

Architect and designer James Sanders co-wrote the PBS series *New York: A Documentary Film*. His book on *New York in the movies*, *Celluloid Skyline*, will be published by Knopf in 2003.

For his unrealized project, a business hotel in Manhattan, the author took a “kit-of-parts” approach. A “spacer” wall element (shown between the right-hand bed and desk) allowed the design to accommodate variations within pre-existing room layouts.

Renderings: Sean Daly/Windtunnel Visualization