



Grand dame

Claire Craig, winner of **id**'s Lifetime Achievement Award, shares the secrets that have made her Dubai's design leader and its cultural ambassador to the world.

TEXT: JOANNE MOLINA

With overwhelming applause from the international design audience, Claire Craig, Design Director of WA International, accepted her Lifetime Achievement Award during **id**'s annual Design Awards night. With hundreds of acclaimed projects to her name, including the multiple award-winning Dubai Opera and The Renaissance Business Bay (scheduled to open at the beginning of 2017), Craig has captured the hearts of the Middle East's design elite, and represented the region around the world.

Craig's approach to design is streamlined, yet complex, allowing her to meticulously respond to her clients' visions. "My philosophy is to create

beautifully proportioned spaces which are eclectically fun, deftly crafted and inspired by their locations," she explains.

Her approach is beautifully illustrated in her recent projects. "The Renaissance was a study of the growth of Dubai and its basic composition; the building of a city literally 'out of the sand and water' to create concrete and glass structures," she says. "The Dubai Opera's design was influenced by the indigenous pearling industry, the traditional dhows and the early Arabic sailors who used astrolabes to navigate the seas."

But one of the last year's most meaningful projects was the Westin at

Al Habtoor City. "It was an impressive project for us," Craig explains. "With over 1000 rooms and suites, four F&B outlets, a 1500-square metre ballroom, 20-treatment room spa and executive club facilities, etc., it's been our largest project so far. There still are areas yet to be finished but the main public areas are now opening, as are the majority of the rooms.

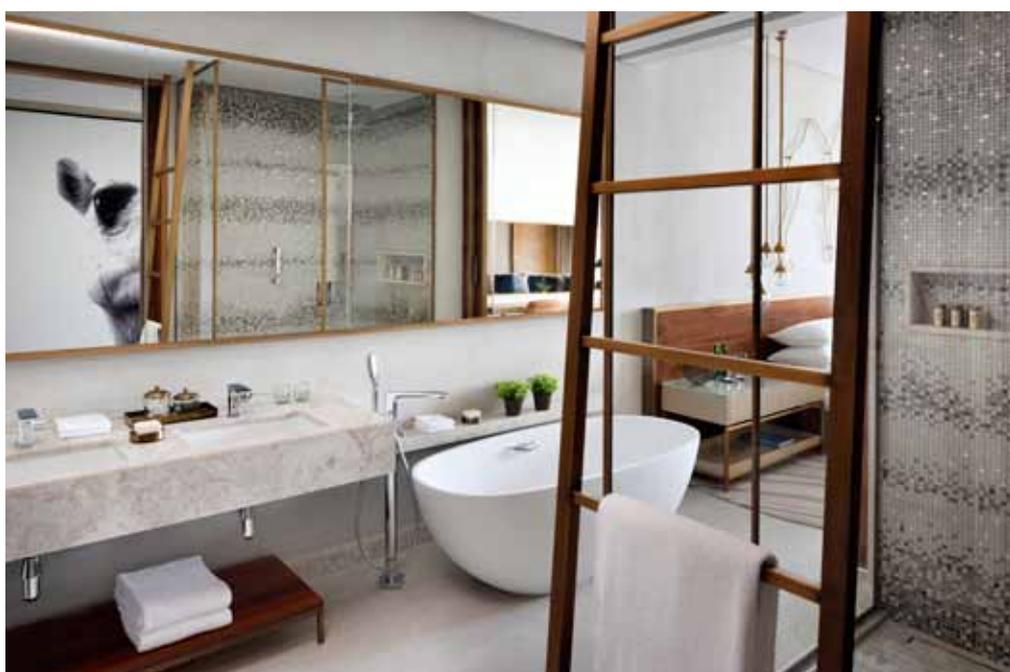
"The response we have had from initial guests and the operator has been great. It has wonderful volume with impressive ceiling heights in all the public areas – which meant we could accentuate proportions in the interior architecture, the lighting and the furniture. I'm extremely pleased with the overall result."

The designer's affinity for her craft began at an early age. "My mother loved interior design and was always in tune with the latest design trends. My father

was a builder and as a result at mother's wishes we were always moving into new houses. I grew up in often unfinished spaces, basically building sites. It was great to be part of the construction process and to be able to create my own interiors from a young age. I later went on to do architecture."

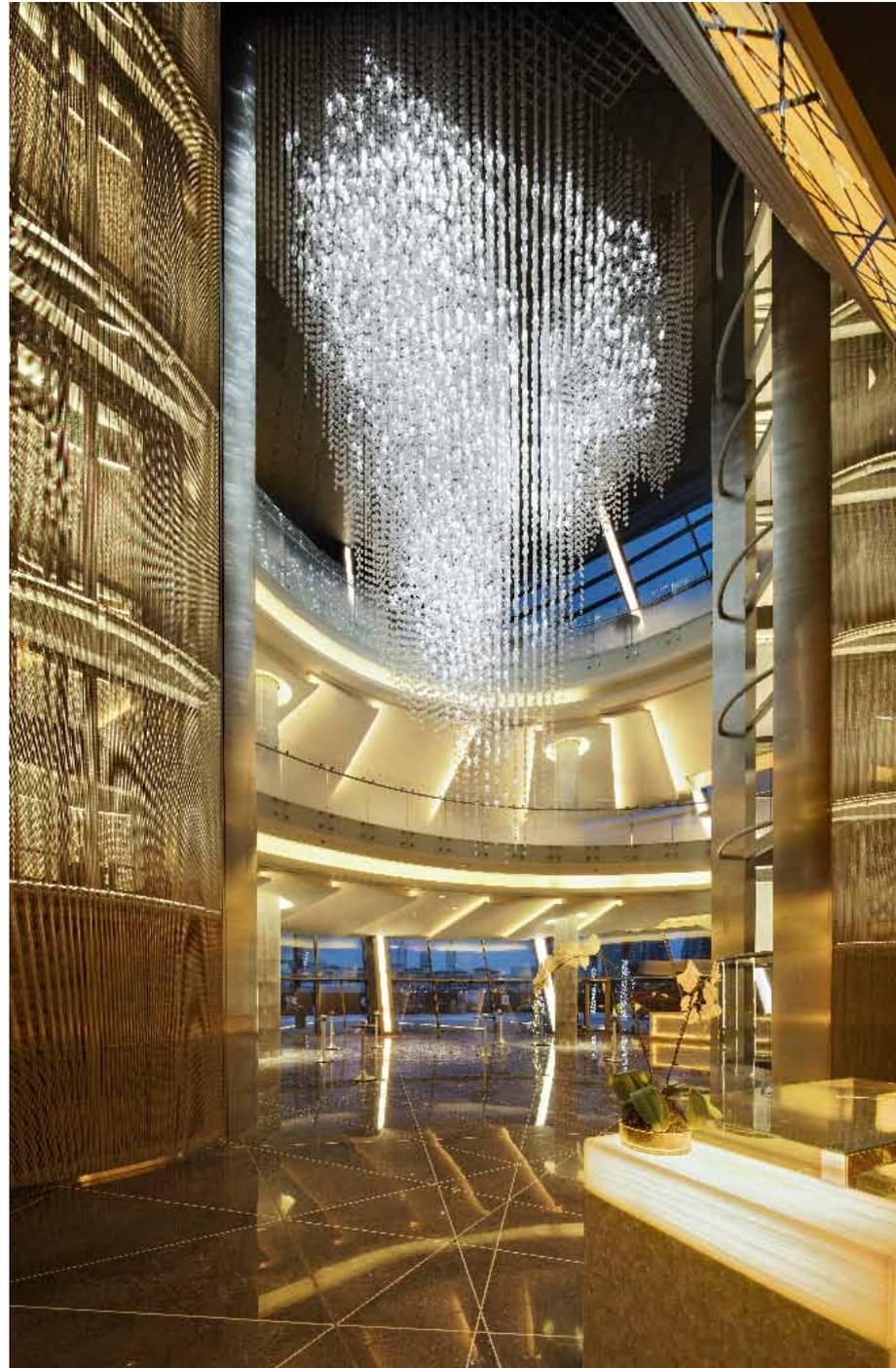
After attending university for both environmental studies and then architecture (ARB and RIBA), the Canadian-born designer joined WA International, London in 1994 and established the design studio for the Dubai office in 1996. She honed her skills in Canada, Saudi Arabia, the United States and Egypt before working with architects Scott Brownrigg & Turner for five years, and then hospitality consultants Wilson Gregory Aeberhard, Spence Harris Hogan and Wrenn Associates in London.

In the UK capital her high-profile projects included Grosvenor House



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Hotel, The May Fair Hotel, InterContinental Park Lane and the Sheraton Skyline Hotel.

But it's her work since 1996 as Design Director of WA International Dubai that has earned her reputation in the region. "From our London office I came to Dubai to oversee a couple of our projects. I thought it would be a couple of years and that was 20 years ago. I have always found the region, its history and amazing growth extremely fascinating."

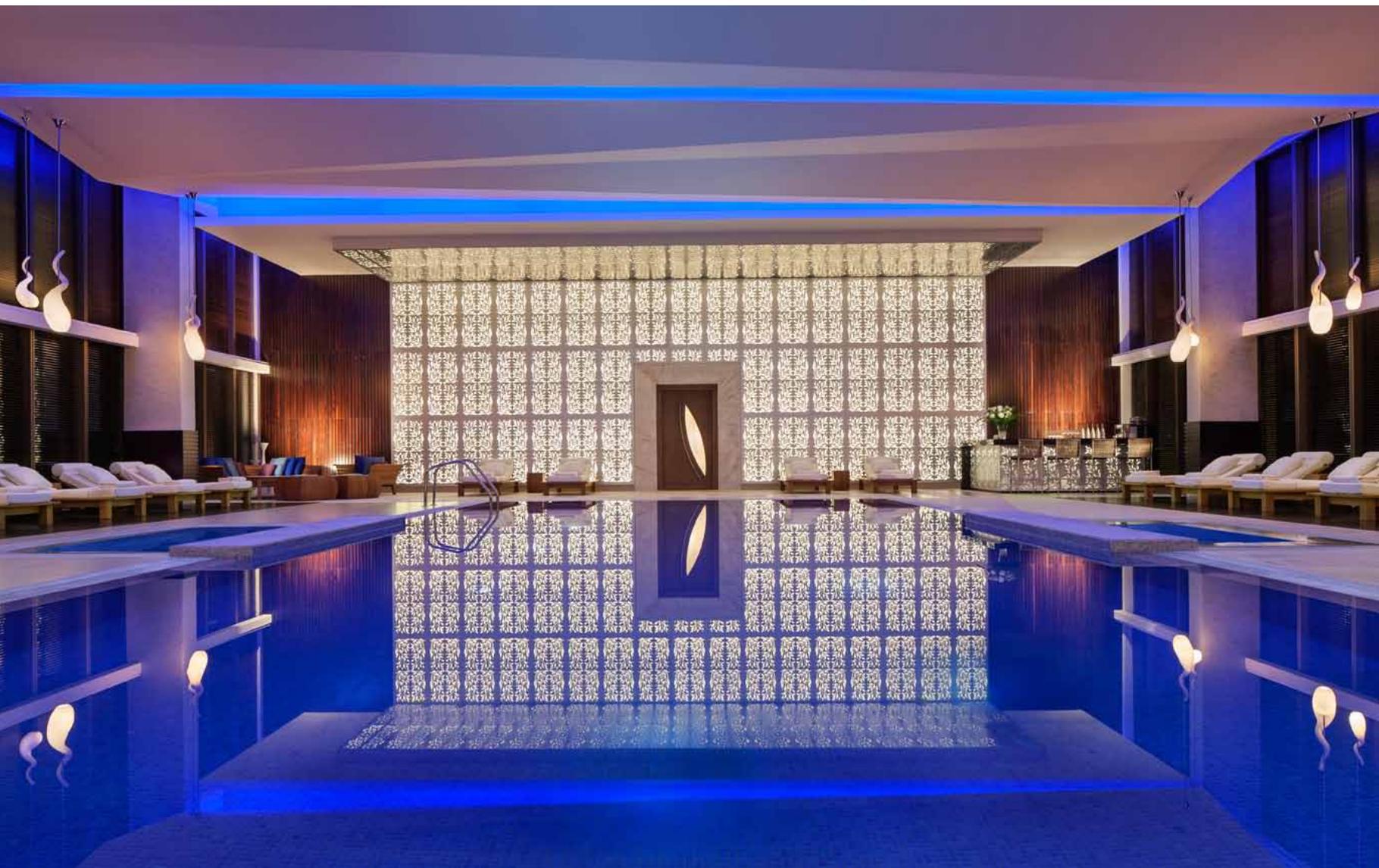
The success of her firm has been inspirational: "I credit our success to the talented individuals working together to maintain aesthetic integrity and innovation throughout every project."

And her respect for her clients is highly valued: "It's important to listen to your client; then to do the research. We don't have a 'house style' and we stay up-to-date with the latest global trends while remaining true to the concept narrative. We always have the courage to try something new."

Craig's three career-defining projects reflect her advanced sensibility. First is the Al Maha Desert Resort, "which we opened in 1999, and [which] has won numerous awards and definitely put WA International on the map as one of the leading hospitality designers in the Middle East," she notes. "Our research into designing a themed Bedouin-styled resort resulted in numerous further commissions for locally-inspired projects."

Also on her list is The Address Downtown Dubai. "When it opened we were immediately flooded with enquires for projects not only in the region but much further afield as well," she explains. And finally, the One&Only The Palm, which "has also resulted in impressive interest for our design, both locally and internationally."

As a key design influencer in the region, Craig is also very much devoted to following the paths of fellow designers. "I've been following Patricia Urquiola's evolutionary furniture design for several years and love her



unconventional creativeness. Her fairly recent move into the entire hotel interior, the Mandarin Oriental, was an inspiration for all hospitality designers," she says with admiration. "Working with the talented Janus Rostock and his team at Atkins on the Dubai Opera was also very inspiring," she beams.

And like many of her peers, she was inspired by the late Zaha Hadid. "She was of my favourite architects for beautiful fluid architecture. I recently visited her cultural centre, Heydar Aliyev Center, in Baku. I had seen it under construction for several years while working on projects in Azerbaijan and was overwhelmed by its amazing form, both external and internal."

Always looking ahead, Craig has apt observations about Middle Eastern design in the 21st Century. "[It] has become one of the leading regions in the world for new and innovative exterior and interior architecture. Our clients are keen for the latest, the biggest, the best. Designers must stay up-to-date with the latest trends and innovations. It has become much more competitive – so we must keep our designers and technicians inquisitive by encouraging and supporting their desire to travel, study and be adventurous." 

