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TAO DOWNTOWN

Rockwell Group designs a restaurant in which to see and be seen in New York

TAO Group pioneered the Pan-Asian cuisine trend in 2000 when it opened TAO in Midtown Manhattan, followed by a Las Vegas location. Capitalizing on the brand's success, the restaurant and nightclub group engaged Rockwell Group to design TAO Downtown in the lower levels of the Maritime Hotel in the Chelsea neighborhood near the Meatpacking District in New York.

Although Rockwell Group did not design either of the previous TAO locations, TAO Group had established a relationship with the firm while collaborating on the Marquee Nightclub at the Cosmopolitan Resort in Las Vegas and could count on it to deliver a standout interior. "We knew that we had to reinvent ourselves due to the fact that we were opening a second location in New York and because the original design, while timeless, was conceived such a long time ago," says Rich Wolf, co-owner of TAO Group. "Our mantra for TAO Downtown was 'next level shit.'"

A platform for people watching

Levels do, in fact, define the space. The 22,000-square-foot restaurant—which spans an entire city block and seats up to 400 throughout—is mostly below grade. The space it occupies had previously contained a restaurant and a music venue, and Rockwell Group chose to relocate the entrance from 16th Street to Ninth Avenue to differentiate TAO from those former establishments. This move also allowed for a dramatic entry procession that begins with coat check and extends down a long passageway framed by portals made from weathered wood slats. The old brick basement walls were revealed and layered with Chinese calligraphy by Studio Hoon Kim and murals of geisha-style women by UK-based street artist HUSH.

After reaching the hostess station, patrons turn right and enter the restaurant bar on the mezzanine level and experience a "wow moment," according to Shawn Sullivan, a partner with Rockwell Group, as they take in the view of the entire length of the restaurant, down into the main dining room on the cellar level. The focal point of the voluminous space is the 40-foot-long grand stair. Made of wood, the stair has deep landings with rounded custom banquettes along the

edges and tables and bench seats positioned at the center for prime people watching. "We wanted to create a restaurant that was about encouraging social interaction—it's less about planting yourself at your table, and more about getting up and moving around," Sullivan says. The stair can transform into a runway for fashion shows or serve as bleachers for movie screenings.

True to the TAO brand, the space is bookended by custom-made Buddha sculptures. A 16-foot-long reclining Buddha rests within the restaurant bar on the mezzanine level, and at the opposite end, a 20-foot-tall Quan Yin Buddha with 24 outstretched arms stands above a koi pond on the cellar level. Rockwell Group's LAB studio designed 3D projection mapping technology that makes waterfalls appear to flow down the statue, its eyes seem to "blink," or tattoos trace magically along its many arms.

Guests can experience the main dining room from different vantage points, including two skyboxes, two private dining rooms on either side of the Quan Yin, or from the INK Bar on the mezzanine level, which is divided from the main dining room by a two-story, laser-cut metal screen featuring an abstracted pattern inspired by traditional Asian screens. Late-night revelers may choose to sip TAO-Tinis in a separate, but equally sumptuous, two-story lounge with a discreet, alley-like entrance from 16th Street.

Mixing found treasures with bespoke features

Rockwell Group designers created a vocabulary that references several Asian cultures and combines curated artifacts with new custom pieces. The result is a space that feels like a recently discovered tomb, and is gritty enough for its downtown location. "We wanted to create the feel of a New York cellar space that had always been there," Sullivan says.

Many elements—including thick, carved stone columns from Bali and antique statues, furniture, and art pieces—were collected by design team members on visits to Asia. Rockwell Group designed most of the light fixtures, from beaded-tassel pendants within INK Bar to oversized, lantern-like pendants set within wire cages that hang throughout the main dining room and mitigate the scale of its high ceiling. Banquettes throughout the restaurant feature luxurious details by Rockwell Group, such as elaborate stitching, channel tufting, and edge rivets.

While many elements within TAO Downtown reference the ancient, the project marks a significant shift in branding for its owner. According to Wolf, "We wiped the slate clean, and together with Rockwell Group, created something fresh, sexy, and breathtakingly beautiful." ●

Rockwell Group custom-designed many elements for the project, including pendant fixtures with shades enclosed by wire cages that provide a sense of scale within the double-height main dining room.

