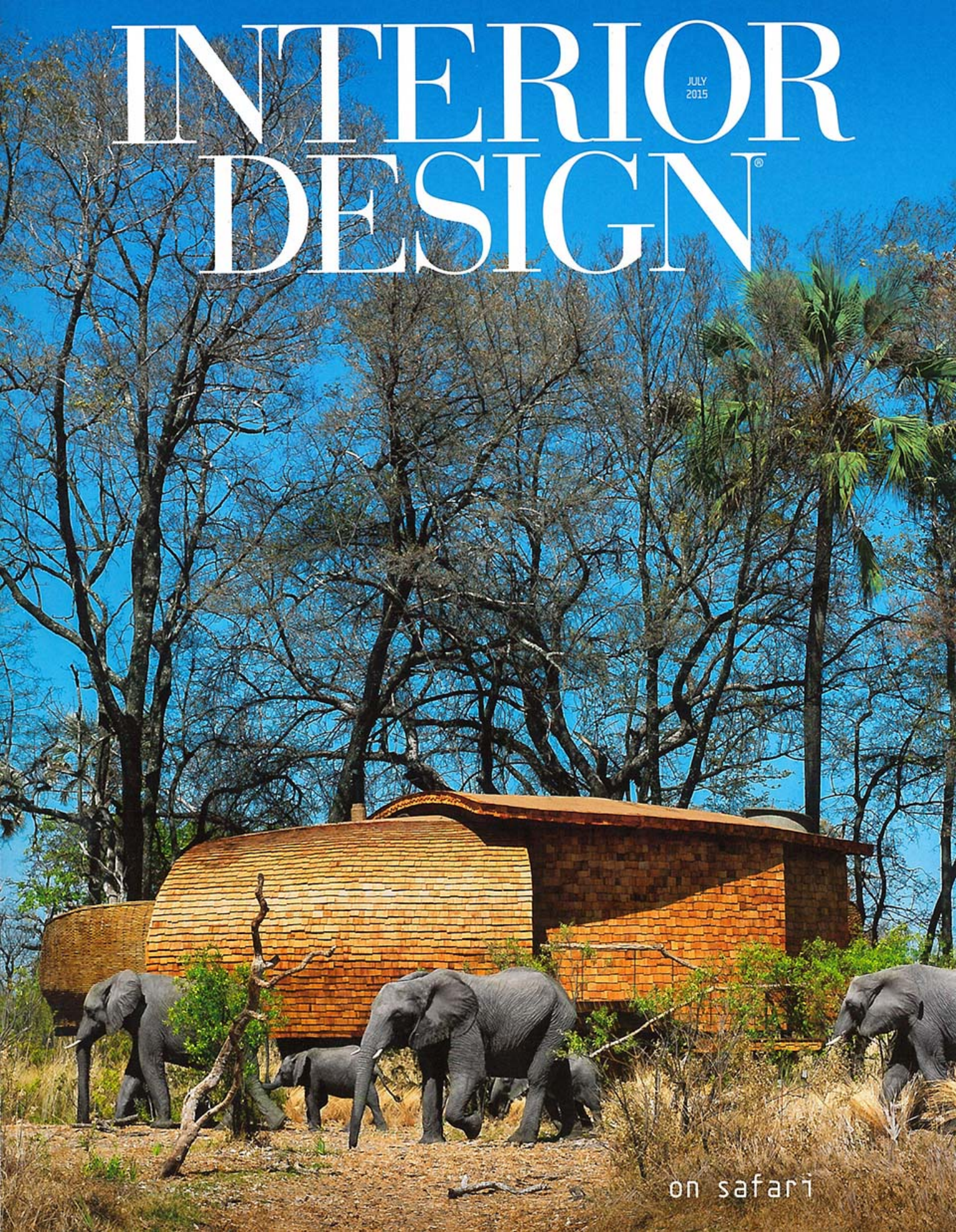


INTERIOR DESIGN®

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on safari





virgin terrain

Rockwell Group Europe blazes a trail of innovation and preservation at Virgin Hotels Chicago

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photography: eric lagnol

Previous spread, left: Rockwell Group Europe converted a 1928 landmark by Rapp and Rapp into Virgin Hotels Chicago.

Previous spread, right: The standard guest rooms feature a bed upholstered in faux leather and wall covering in wool felt, both custom.

Top: Wool carpet at the entry was conceived as a paint spill.

Center: The bed's patented padded corner allows for extra lounging. **Bottom:** Polyester velvet drapes a nook at Miss Ricky's, a riff on the diner.

Opposite: Capped by a plaster ceiling, now restored, the onetime banking hall now houses a restaurant, the Commons Club.



"Honoring the historic Chicago fabric became goal number one"



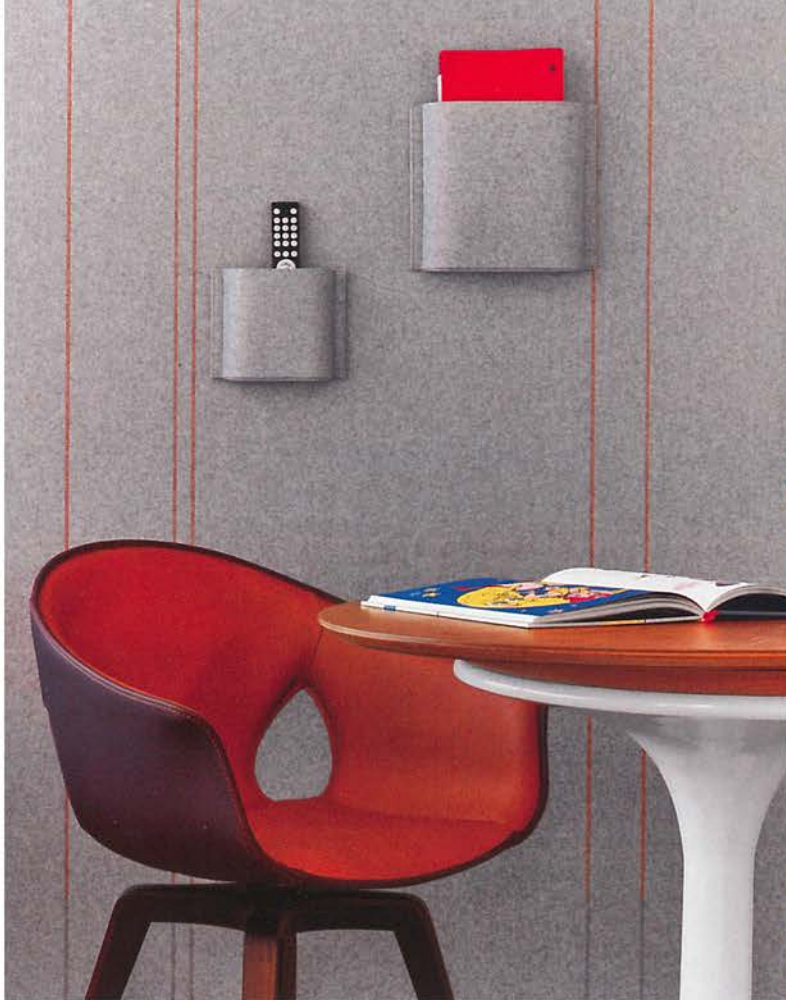
When Richard Branson announced plans for his Virgin Group to open 20 hotels around the world, expectations immediately hit the roof. Pundits predicted a slew of modernist buildings, and everyone anticipated new notions in lodging, too. Known for reclassifying and reengineering every aspect of travel, hospitality, and entertainment—on-demand dining aboard Virgin Atlantic Airways, for example—Branson never assumes that precedents are worth following, not even the best-established ones.

The first Virgin Hotels location, a 1928 landmarked Chicago bank by the noted movie theater architects Rapp and Rapp, is just steps from the famed Loop's elevated train. Honoring that historic fabric became goal number one for Rockwell Group Europe, an offshoot of *Interior Design* Hall of Fame member David Rockwell's U.S. firm. At the time, Rockwell Group Europe's creative director was Diego Gronda. (He recently left to start his own firm.) And Gronda already knew Branson, having started work a dozen years ago on his massive private retreat in New Jersey, of all exotic locales—a project that was never fully realized.

Known for nonstop traveling, staying at a different hotel every night to keep abreast of the latest hospitality trends, Gronda was equally passionate about the Chicago project's number-two goal: CEO Raul Leal was looking for an unmistakably Virgin-branded lifestyle experience where, as always, no detail or process is taken for granted. Gronda was prepared to deliver, based on more research per square foot than a robotics lab. "The result had to be this masterpiece envisaged by Leal but at the same time preserve Chicago's glorious past," Rockwell explains.

The 26-story flagship's 250 guest rooms are awash in originality. Their doors in Virgin red are accompanied by matching sconces that would look right at home on a front porch and, if you've reserved a pet-friendly room, a life-size porcelain pooch waiting patiently under the light. In standard rooms, the first things you notice upon entering ➤





Top, from left: In a guest room, the oak top of a custom table rotates. A custom chandelier at the restaurant features acrylic orbs containing toy figurines. **Bottom, from left:** Color-changing LEDs transform a corner of the restaurant. The valet stand for the diner is a reproduction British phone booth.

Opposite top, from left: Porcelain dogs indicate pet-friendly guest rooms. In a penthouse suite's bathroom, tile frames trompe l'oeil vinyl wall covering. **Opposite bottom:** A guest room's custom chair has a Vespa scooter's front for a backrest.





are a makeup station and a sink vanity—Gronda notes that about half of guests will be women. The WC and shower are behind doors nearby, and the bedroom beckons straight ahead. Its patented bed features a padded corner footboard for creative reclining. Other ways to lounge and relax include a swivel chair in extravagant hand-stitched leather. Stitching also details the gray felt wall covering, which incorporates convenient pockets for menus and TV remotes. Overall, the aura is calming, versus the rock-and-roll vibe of the penthouse suites.

Alongside the innovations, the team also left well enough alone. The bank's intricately ornamented plaster coffering, discovered by Leal behind a suspended ceiling, has been restored as a highlight of the double-height restaurant, the Commons Club. As the oval island bar in the center of the restaurant soars up toward the plasterwork, surprising nooks to the sides also play a role. One called the Funny Library features shelves stocked with silly art and books about comedy, plus a chandelier with acrylic orbs containing toy figurines.

Gronda's vision draws out the best of the art deco elements. Cast bronze panels, found on some elevator doors, have now been replicated for other levels. The lobby, an archetypal bank entry, has been polished up and but left largely untouched—though a red carpet now spills its way down the marble stairs to “pool,” like paint, on the floor.

Guests who linger on the ground level will encounter the red British phone booth that serves as the reception stand for Miss Ricky's. ➔



Top: Roberto Lazzeroni designed a penthouse suite's task chair. **Center:** Lockers in a changing room for the spa are painted aluminum. **Bottom:** A custom chandelier in blackened aluminum hangs in the suite.

Opposite: Stained-oak veneer wraps the corridor to the spa's treatment rooms.



"The variety and creativity are pure Chicago, as seen through a Virgin lens"



a reinterpretation of a 1960's Hollywood diner. Other guests might meander down to the basement's elegant spa or venture all the way up to the rooftop bar by Rockwell's fellow Hall of Fame member Paola Navone.

The variety and creativity are pure Chicago, as seen through a Virgin lens. "We didn't want people referring to us as just 'that red hotel,'" Leal says. This is no game of Monopoly. ➤

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PROJECT TEAM

EVA LONGORIA; MARIA BRIME: ROCKWELL GROUP EUROPE. **BOOTH HANSEN:** ARCHITECT OF RECORD. **BRIAN ORTER** LIGHTING DESIGN; LIGHTING CONSULTANT. **TOM GRABOSKI ASSOCIATES:** GRAPHICS CONSULTANT. **CAIN MILLWORK:** WOODWORK. **AMERICAN UPHOLSTERY DESIGN;** FIL DOUX TEXTILES; UPHOLSTERY WORKSHOPS. **FR-ONE;** GRUPO LAMADRID; MICELI DRAPERY; DRAPERY WORKSHOPS. **PRYOR ARCHITECTURAL SIGNAGE SYSTEM;** SIGNAGE WORKSHOP. **JAMES MCHUGH CONSTRUCTION CO.:** GENERAL CONTRACTOR.

PRODUCT SOURCES

FROM FRONT MAYA ROMANOFF: CUSTOM WALL COVERING (GUEST ROOMS). **VALLEY FORGE FABRICS:** PILLOW FABRIC, OTTOMAN UPHOLSTERY. **ICE INTERNATIONAL:** CUSTOM RUGS (ENTRY, RESTAURANT, SUITE). **P/KAUFMANN:** CURTAIN FABRIC, SOFA FABRIC (GUEST ROOM), CURTAIN FABRIC, BANQUETTE FABRIC (DINER). **HALLMARK LOUNGE:** PENDANT FIXTURES, TABLE LAMPS (GUEST ROOMS), SCONCE (HALL), CUSTOM CHANDELIER (SUITE). **BRAVURA FINE CARPETS & RUGS:** CUSTOM RUGS (GUEST ROOMS). **ARMSTRONG WORLD INDUSTRIES:** CEILING SYSTEM (DINER). **POLTRONA FRAU:** SWIVEL CHAIRS (GUEST ROOM, SUITE). **ZANOTTA:** SIDE TABLES (RESTAURANT). **DELIGHTFULL:** FLOOR LAMPS (RESTAURANT, SUITE), LINEAR FIXTURES, RECESSED CEILING FIXTURES (SPA). **THROUGH SALVAGE ONE:** RECEPTION STAND (DINER). **DALTILE:** FLOOR TILE. **MILLIKEN & COMPANY:** CARPET (HALL). **KOHLER CO.:** TUB, TUB FITTINGS (SUITE). **GRAHAM AND GREEN:** WALL COVERING. **SANCAL DISEÑO:** SIDE TABLES (GUEST ROOM). **MARSET:** TASK LAMP (SUITE). **OPUZEN:** BOLSTER FABRIC. **THROUGH ARTSPACE INDUSTRIAL FURNITURE:** LOCKERS (SPA). **JANUS ET CIE:** CURTAIN FABRIC. **SALONI CERÁMICA:** TILE. **CLASSICON:** TABLE (SUITE). **THROUGHOUT** BEL & BEL; CISCO BROTHERS; LAQUERCRAFT; QUALITY & COMPANY; VAUGHAN BENZ; WEST COAST INDUSTRIES: CUSTOM FURNITURE. **FONTANAARTE;** NEIDHARDT: CUSTOM LIGHT FIXTURES. **PORCELANOSA:** FLOOR TILE. **SHERWIN-WILLIAMS COMPANY:** PAINT.

