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HOTEL KEEPING

THE DESIGN DOYENNE BEHIND FIRMDALE HOTELS SHARES HER VERY SPECIFIC IDEAS ABOUT HOW TO CREATE AND SELL A LUXURY EXPERIENCE.

By JEFF WEINSTEIN, EDITOR IN CHIEF

Kit Kemp believes experiences are an integral part of the surprise, fascination and fantasy of travel.

To that end, along with husband-partner Tim Kemp, they create their London-based Firmdale hotels with whimsy, bold colors and commissioned art pieces and accents to create memorable experiences. She says it's important that their hotels are not a pastiche of the past but live in the now.

This approach has led to much critical acclaim and success (GOP at 39.9% through July 2019) for a portfolio of 10 luxury boutique properties predominantly around London and with a third New York City project, Warren Street Hotel in Tribeca, about two years in the offing.

She doesn't define luxury as shiny fabrics, or monochrome. "And to me, it's not gold and ormolu," says the company's co-owner and creative director. "It's actually more like a tailor-made suit. Everything is designed and made for that particular room. It's like a couture outfit, really. That's how I define luxury."

DEFINITIVE STATEMENTS

Known for detailed storytelling in her design, signature in-room mannequin adornments and tall headboards with collages, embroideries and appliques, Kemp asserts each room needs a focal point. "Whether that is a large painting, a piece of marble work, a mobile or whether it's some other sort of art form, there usually is something that you hang your hat on," she says.

"Within people's homes, they want to feel that they've designed the cutlery or some element within it, and I think we have to pull that across into hotels," she continues. "It's that custom-made piece, really."

A textile, fragrance and homewares designer, author and champion of British art, craft and sculpture, Kemp says a mistake hoteliers make is having too many designers involved in a project because it often "doesn't create a harmonious whole."

"There has to be a congruent flow throughout, whether you decide that you want to go to 1960s pop art or reference

particular architects," she says. "But then there's that fun. There should always be that quirky, fun element, as a lot of interiors should actually make you smile. The problem is that lots of them are terribly serious and once something gets serious, it also gets instantly forgettable."

Another Kemp signature is bold color. "It's the easiest way to make people happy," she says. "We're talking about that miserable gray day when you've had a really heavy meeting and you come back and you put your key in the lock and you actually want to feel something slightly joyous, something which takes you out of the ordinary. And that's what color does. It's not really what gray does."

Lately, Kemp says, she has been using lots of blues, then adding bolts of raspberry or even tangerine. "But really, it's how you use color, how you contrast color and how you color block," she says. "I just like plain colors if the contrasts are really beautiful, but it's also textures. It's getting those textures and actually making them feel as



The World of Kit Kemp at Bergdorf Goodman, New York City

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COLLABORATIONS

Kemp pays close attention to the art scene, often at galleries following favorites such as London-based Annie Morris, and looking for up-and-comers, some of whom she may commission to create works for the hotels.

“If you do decide that you want to commission someone, you’ve really got to like their work — and then you’ve got to allow them the space to actually create something that they will like doing,” Kemp says. “The whole point of creating is an organic process. And you should end up with something better than you originally had imagined and maybe sometimes taking you by surprise.” Some works have appreciated in value. “The things that I bought several years ago, I can’t actually even afford myself now. That’s a rather good way.”

Firmdale is expanding its salon

experiences, which include art walks and talks with tea service, for example, or conversations with noteworthy authors.

“We’re gaining quite a following of people who like similar things to us, or maybe it’s opening their eyes to various artists that they may not have heard before,” Kemp says. “And I think that has an element of luxury about it, or exclusiveness in a way.”

Along with Kemp’s art and design sensibilities comes, retail opportunities. She sells her stylings online at Shop Kit Kemp and collaborates with high-end retailer Bergdorf Goodman in New York City. As well, she has partnered with brands such as Wedgwood, Wilton Carpets and others to creating collections including tableware, fragrance, furniture, fabrics and wallpaper.

“It’s been so interesting to see how my blog (kitkemp.com) gives people their first exposure to our hotels,” she says of her online shop. “In a way, it’s had a crossover effect, and that was surprising to us, actually.”



**KNOW
KIT KEMP**

Design dislikes: Too much plastic, modular (“I like the feel of the artisan, of craft”), too many glass finishes because it looks too hard

Book of the moment: “A Single Thread” by Tracy Chevalier, which paints a richly detailed picture of history and social change in England in the years between the wars, focusing on weaving and textiles

Favorite websites: Always about furniture, including deringhall.com and architecturaldigest.com

When she steps away: “I never really step away as I love design. If I go to the theater, I’m always looking at the set. If I’m going to our hotels, obviously I just want to look around the corner. I’m just basically curious and nosy.”

Hotel pet peeves: Wires that are going everywhere are really a nuisance; curtains that feel like rubber because they are rubber; towels with so much conditioner that they don’t actually dry; and too much starch on sheets