

Making Modern Classics

Laurence Geller opens up about his own personal canvas: the hotel By Victoria Charters



Laurence Geller. Image courtesy Strategic Hotels and Resorts.

I'm a hotelier. I started as a chef, I grew up through hotels...in its purest form it is creation, but it's creating a product that costs hundreds of millions of dollars," explains Laurence Geller, the president and CEO of Strategic Hotels and Resorts. "It's all about service. When I buy a hotel, it's a blank canvas for me and my fellow artists to work on. The finished hotel is a theater production for the staff to act out.

The uniforms are the costume, the jobs are the roles, and the customers applaud with their wallets."

A true renaissance man, Geller's role as orchestrator of escape only complements the numerous other hats he wears—those of art collector, Churchill aficionado, marathon runner (he's got 22 under his belt) and published author. His first novel, *Do Not Disturb*, was published in 2007 and was immediately snapped up for the Oscar gift bag.



Sculpture embellishes the lobby of Geller's Four Seasons Punta Mita. Image courtesy Strategic Hotels and Resorts.

The art of creating a seamless luxury experience for the guest is one that Geller likens to the activity of bees. "A luxury hotel, under the surface, is a study in purposeful chaos: busy people, swarming here and there, adapting on the fly to unexpected demands," he says. "It works because everyone has a role, a skill, and a schedule—like bees in a hive. A guest at a luxury hotel judges each stay by their total experience. They should feel well-taken-care-of—pampered even—as if an army of workers was exclusively focused on the exquisite comfort of this one guest...like a queen bee. The properties of great luxury hotels embody the sweet artful character of its creators as if they store the passion and energy in a designed and ordered experience...like the honeycomb."

Strategic Hotels & Resorts boasts a portfolio of 20 luxury hotels and resorts totaling more than 10,000 rooms, and Geller is passionate about making the art, architecture, and design of each of his operations speak to each guest. "In the hotels we ask the customers what art they expect to see and then we tend to try and get that," he states. "We will get some good pieces and we will always support local artists. For example, at the Four Seasons Resort in Punta Mita we are building a sculpture garden that provides young, talented, but relatively unknown artists a platform to show their work. It fosters the arts because many guests at the Four Seasons are collectors."

Situated on Mexico's Pacific coast just 25 miles northwest of Puerto Vallarta and surrounded by pristine white sand beaches, crystal blue



Poolside cabanas and artful ceramics overlook the Pacific at Geller's Four Seasons Punta Mita. Image courtesy Strategic Hotels and Resorts.

waters and majestic mountains, the Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita is a spectacular, world-class resort. Under Geller's watchful eye, Punta Mita has been upgraded to one of the most desirable destinations in the world. As part of this transformation, Strategic hired world-renowned architect Manuel Mestre to create two one-of-a-kind super-villas (both in excess of 12,000 square feet) featuring magnificent accommodations in an absolutely private setting. These sophisticated villas come with their own staff and have sweeping, 180-degree views of both the ocean and the Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course.

Another project Geller is excited about is Aqua, a new building that will complement his Fairmont Chicago hotel overlooking Millennium Park

and the Frank Gehry-designed Jay Pritzker Pavilion. The groundbreaking tower was designed by the accomplished Jeanne Gang (of Loewenberg Architects and Studio Gang Architects) and suggests a new future that integrates hotels with city living.

Aqua is a massive sculpture set elegantly within the crowded heart of a vibrant city; the name "Aqua" is in keeping with the nautical theme that many of the developments in this area have taken. But while the other buildings are conventional skyscrapers, Aqua is special. In an homage to both Lake Michigan and the Chicago River below, the tower's surface is comprised of undulating balconies that, when viewed together, resemble a ripple or a wave.



An open design scheme blends the indoors and outdoors in a Four Seasons Punta Mita room. Image courtesy Strategic Hotels and Resorts.



The Four Seasons Punta Mita's oceanside pool provides breathtaking views of the sunset. Image courtesy Strategic Hotels and Resorts.

STRATEGIC HOTELS & RESORTS INCLUDE:

- Fairmont Chicago
- Fairmont Scottsdale Princess
- Four Seasons Hotel Mexico City
- Four Seasons Hotel Washington DC
- Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita
- Hotel Del Coronado
- Hyatt Regency La Jolla
- Hyatt Regency New Orleans
- Hyatt Regency Phoenix
- Intercontinental Chicago
- Intercontinental Miami
- Intercontinental Praha
- Loews Santa Monica Beach
- Marriott Grosvenor Square
- Marriott Hamburg
- Marriott Lincolnshire
- Marriott Paris Champs Elysées
- Ritz Carlton Half Moon Bay
- Ritz Carlton Laguna Niguel
- Westin St. Francis

Geller says that Aqua's artistic profile is dependent on new technology. "They pour the balconies square and then, using satellite-controlled lasers, they carve the balconies in an exquisite wave," he details.

He goes on to explain that Strategic Hotels is purchasing the bottom fifteen floors of Aqua, in which it will build 210 suites for its Fairmont Hotel, located immediately across the street. It will be linked to the Fairmont by underground tunnels for cars and pedestrians. The new space will also have a 20,000-square-foot ballroom "overlooking the park—something which no one has ever tried before in Chicago," Geller says.

And the creative hotelier has another art project guaranteed to light up the Fairmont. "I asked the mayor if he would let me build a two-story piece of art on the 15th floor," he recounts. "So we are having a competition between five electronic artists."

When asked which hotel he is most proud of, Geller frequently mentions the Ritz Carlton Laguna Niguel. Beautifully situated atop a 150-foot bluff overlooking the ocean, this hotel offers a dynamic coastal retreat for



Geller's Aqua building, Chicago. Image courtesy Strategic Hotels and Resorts.

every season. In 2004, it was extensively renovated to mark its 20th anniversary.

In the end, Geller explains that his art form is uniquely complex. "For hotels—even the finest hotels—to remain competitive, they must continually change and evolve," he reveals. "We are creating a living piece of art and continually reworking its parts. Some hotels, such as the Four Seasons Mexico City, are important architectural icons. And so we must sort out how to improve our properties while remaining true to their architectural heritage. Oftentimes this means involving stakeholders who feel passionately about the properties and the environment in which they exist. In the case of Laguna Niguel, the Ritz Carlton sits adjacent to natural seashore. It is incredibly rewarding to me and my team to be able to work through solutions that preserve the integrity of our properties while improving their overall aesthetic and experiential appeal."

Accordingly, Geller reveals his intent is "to create an atmosphere where people want to come back. They can't

express why, but the idea of returning and the decision to return feels great. We are producing one product only: memories. I want to create magic moments and memories." ■

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