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RAISING THE STANDARD

André Balazs creates hotels with buzz—and plenty of substance

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THE STANDARD

BY JENA TESSE FOX

Hotelier André Balazs' new Manhattan property brings his philosophy about hospitality to life

WALKING ALONG Washington Street in Manhattan's trendy Meatpacking District, one might notice something slightly unusual. Beneath the High Line—an abandoned elevated railway that is being converted into a park—there is a large plaza and outdoor café... and, directly underneath the tracks, the entrance to a hotel lobby.

It's not an illusion. Straddled above the High Line is innovative hotelier André Balazs' newest property, **The Standard, New York** (www.standardhotels.com), the latest offering from a man involved in every aspect of the business—from choosing the hotel's location to selecting the color schemes for each room.

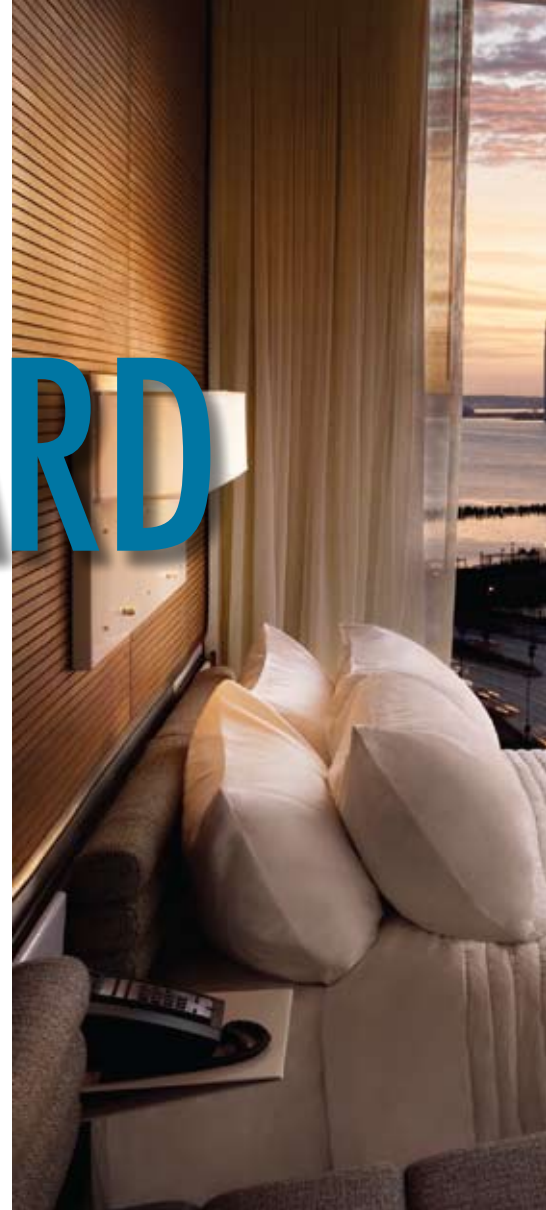
Whereas most hotels want to be visible from every location, The Standard, New York is only visible from several blocks away. The closer one gets to the hotel, the more the building disappears behind the railway. Pedestrians on the street itself might not even notice what is looming 20 stories above their heads. And that's just fine with Balazs.

By design, the hotel is meant to blend in with the historic buildings that surround it, even while towering above them. "A lot of people saw it as problematic," the hotelier says about the location. "We would have looked at buying [an existing] hotel, but we simply couldn't find one that made sense or was good enough." The price for the property was "relatively less expensive" at the time because of the High Line, which was then owned by CSX, a private company that has since given the railway to the city of New York. Where other developers saw the High Line as a problem, Balazs saw an opportunity.

"The challenge for us—or any developer—was: How do you build on the site that is compromised by this [railway] going through it?" he says. Rather than build on one side or the other, which would have resulted in a very tall building that would have been "contextually all wrong" in the historic district, Balazs found a more inventive solution. "We decided to do something that spanned the High Line, and therefore made it much more contextually right—'contextually' meaning that it belongs in the neighborhood, in keeping with the low buildings. I think—I know—it'll be the only building ever built over the High Line, because we were fortunate enough to build it when the city didn't yet control it."

Design for Living

Balazs' diverse history has had a clear influence on his expertise as a hotelier. He has, at different times, been involved in biotechnology, sculpture, journalism and architecture. "I've





HERE: Rooms at The Standard, New York are small, but the views are panoramic

BELOW LEFT: The Standard, New York seems to float above the High Line, which hides it from street view

always been interested in the story, in the arc of a narrative and how people envision themselves in moments and places,” he says. “A hotel, because it encompasses everything from a restaurant and a bar to a quiet lobby and a private room, has always seemed to me the ideal stage for examining the issues inherent in that.”

With a wide variety of properties under his belt—including LA’s Chateau Marmont (a notorious celebrity hotspot since 1929); The Mercer in New York’s SoHo district; The Raleigh in Miami; Sunset Beach in New York’s Shelter Island; and Standard Hotels in Hollywood, Downtown LA and Miami—Balazs was able to apply his experience and skills to his first from-the-ground-up hotel.

In designing the fourth in his affordable-yet-hip-and-trendy Standard series, Balazs wanted to avoid cookie-cutter designs that seem, well, standard in other chains. “They’re typically built by a commercial developer, and then somewhere along the way, a hotel company offers some specifications

about decor and size of rooms,” he says of other popular properties. “But basically, the building that’s produced is a manufactured product, meaning that they calculated the cheapest way to build a square foot. And that becomes a box—and that’s typically what a hotel room is: a box inside of a box. We’re different here, because we were the developer and we’re the operator. So we were building a hotel for ourselves, and we were building it specifically to be a Standard.

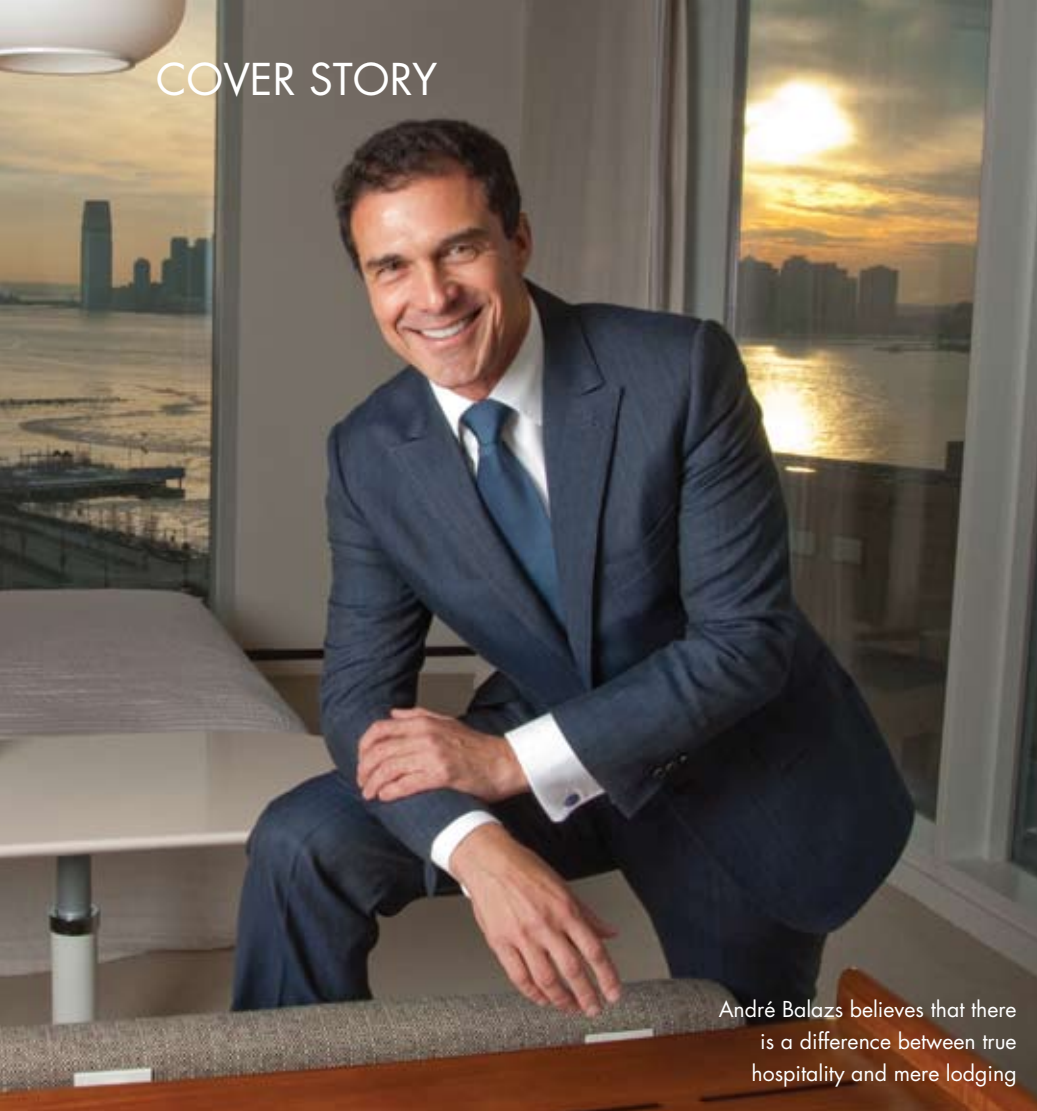
“One of the specific things I learned from the Chateau, which we then applied to the Mercer and applied in spades to The Standard, is that to construct and design as many room types as possible,” he continues, eschewing the traditional attitude of increasing space for increased price. “In my experience, that really matters to nobody. What matters is a combination of other features that make one room more attractive to an individual than another. So at The Standard, for example, we have probably 20 different room types, and that’s without speaking

of suites. In a new construction building, a developer will argue that the rationale is to standardize everything and thereby cut costs. In our point of view, especially since The Standard isn’t (which is our favorite slogan), that’s the exact opposite.”

Like many New York City hotels, rooms at The Standard are on the small side (many are approximately 250 square feet; the largest is 400 square feet). The windows, however, take up most of the walls, letting in plenty of light and producing an effect of spaciousness that could relax even the most anxious claustrophobe. “You get the sense of light and air, which you don’t find anywhere in New York,” Balazs says about the rooms. “You couldn’t get it in another [hotel’s] room, even if you had two or three times the square footage, because it would just be inward-looking. It’d be a big box.”

Reflecting the Neighborhood

Adapting each property to its location is essential to Balazs’ philosophy. “We really



André Balazs believes that there is a difference between true hospitality and mere lodging

believe in making everything site-specific and reflective of the neighborhood,” he says, “but also, if the building is converted, making it reflective of what it used to be, maintaining the architectural language. So, the experience of going to that hotel is unique and fresh.

“The name is more indicative of an attitude, a service level and ease of doing business there. It’s less indicative of ‘this is the look’ or ‘this is the decorator.’” That level of service, he says, is the difference between the hospitality industry and the lodging industry.

“They’re two completely different things,” Balazs says of the two concepts. “The American hotel industry after WWII went full tilt into the lodging industry. Hospitality was not something anyone wanted to bother with. And yet hospitality in Europe was always true with the idea of the boutique hotel, i.e., a boutique as compared to a department store... What was meant by the term ‘boutique hotel’ was that it had, like a boutique shop, a singular point of view. It was not trying to be everything for everybody, and it did not have a whole

bunch of different voices going on at once. It had a point of view.

“Of course, a boutique hotel is nothing new, because in Europe, it’s just a hotel,” he continues. “In a country where we no longer have hotels, we focus on lodging because we’re dominated by Holiday Inn, Sheraton and Starwood. In that environment, in the lodging industry, to bring back a real hotel that’s unique, we call them ‘boutique.’ That’s a good hotel, the one that sophisticated people respond to. It’s really been what a good hotel has always been. It’s attentive, personalized service with a point of view, and that point of view is about taking care of [the guests] and being hospitable. It’s not about decor. It’s not about design.”

The Choreography of Hospitality

Balazs describes true hospitality as being like a dance or theatrical production. “It’s the choreography of a guest’s experience,” he says. “For example, at The Standard, it’s a fairly large hotel—by European standards, it’s enormous—and yet the front reception is very intimate, and I think everyone

feels like it’s quite a small, intimate hotel. The distance traveled from the front desk to reception is small. It’s direct. It’s uncluttered. There’s no pageantry about it... It’s controlled. It has an intended effect. It’s not careless. It’s not thoughtless. The choreography has to do with applying that kind of thinking and execution to every aspect. What exactly is the experience when you pick up the phone and ask for room service? What exactly is the experience when you get a wakeup call? That’s the choreography of hospitality.”

Which is not to say that design is insignificant. “The things that you put into place as the developer and designer of a hotel are critical ultimately in the way the guest feels,” he says. When hotels are developed, designed and managed by different groups, the divisions will manifest in the guest experience. By being involved in every aspect of his hotels, Balazs can make certain that every guest’s experience is what he would have it be.

When he renovated and revitalized the Chateau Marmont, for example, Balazs maintained the culture of the famous (some would say infamous) property in terms of service, style and quality. “It was a matter of staying true to that fold and creating a culture around it,” he says, “and somehow capturing it in the staff, the attitudes, the decor—and nurturing it back to life.”

As he develops more hotels, Balazs hopes to bring the qualities of his luxury properties to The Standard brand. “Some people might even start [at a Standard] at a certain point in their career and maybe graduate to one of the luxury hotels as their expectations for service go to another level,” he says. “Our intent is very much to address both of these—to be in each city with both a Standard hotel and a luxury hotel.” This way, he says, when business groups travel together, the CEO can stay at a property like The Mercer while the entourage stays at The Standard.

“I think we’ve gotten very, very distracted over the last 10 years with ideas that you can somehow decorate your way into a meaningful hotel experience,” he says. “It doesn’t matter what color the furniture is. It’s not going to change your experience.” As people get more sophisticated about what a good hotel can be, André Balazs hopes that he can help create “a legacy of customers who become more demanding and expect more. They deserve more.”