EXCESS ALL AREAS

Dopamine décor is gaining traction in many of the world's leading hotels as a backlash to beige, writes **CARRIE HUTCHINSON**





PHOTOGRAPHY VINCENT LEROUX.


WARREN STREET
HOTEL
New York





Above: the dining room at Warren Street Bar & Restaurant, New York. Opposite: the vibrant lobby at Kit Kemp's Warren Street Hotel.
PREVIOUS PAGES Left: Le Grand Mazarin's Le Jardin d'Hiver. Right: a Deluxe Room at Le Grand Mazarin.

EVERY TIME I PASSED THE PHOTOGRAPH IN THE hallway of my suite, I stopped to dwell on it. Entitled *Koalaclava*, the piece by artist Jo Duck shows a man wearing a disembowelled toy koala on his head while sipping what looks like red cordial through a straw. It was visually arresting, of course, but above all else it was weird.

A decade ago, *Koalaclava* would never have passed muster for inclusion in a hotel room. But, at Melbourne's Hannah St Hotel, the all-female art collection curated by design practice Flack Studio is just the start of a richer and bolder approach to luxury hotel interiors, where every surface is tactile, details are to be discovered, and colour is not a dirty word.

After years of polite, less-is-more décor, maximalism is having its moment. Fifty shades of greige are being replaced by jewel tones, mixed patterns and custom creations.

"Dopamine décor", as it's known, is growing in popularity everywhere from our homes to Pinterest boards to hotel suites, as a direct response to all that's going on around us. In a world that seems, well, doomed, many of us want to surround ourselves in a bit of joy, particularly when we're travelling.

In their research, neuroscientists Semir Zeki and Tomohiro Ishizu showed that the brain's reward centre – the same area that's activated when we tumble into love – lights up in subjects exposed to aesthetically pleasing art or beautiful music. But it's not just dopamine being formed when this happens; it's a cocktail of neurotransmitters that control a range of feelings from belonging to excitement. Whimsy, it seems, is the way forward and we're seeking out temporary bases that fill us with joy.

"I'm going to do a talk called 'The Future's Bright'," says Kit Kemp, founder and creative director of Firmdale Hotels, from her London studio. "Because it's so bloody unbright at the moment with everything going on. As far as interiors go, people want to shut the door and be in a room that makes them feel happy."

She prefers the term "cluttered minimalism" to maximalism. "I love to think of a layered look, an interior that looks like it's wearing high heels," she says. "I love it when you go into a room more than once and you find more things: something on the table, a detail in a carpet, some contrast piping."

She first unleashed this look at the Dorset Square Hotel in 1985. More than 40 years and 11 properties down the track, Kemp is creating her own fabrics and

PHOTOGRAPHY SIMON BROWN.



The living space of the Two Bedroom Basketball Suite at the Kelly Wearstler-designed Downtown L.A Proper Hotel.





PHOTOGRAPHY JUSTIN NICHOLAS (EMPORIUM HOTEL).

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china, as well as working with independent artists and designers. The interiors of her latest opening, Warren Street Hotel in Manhattan's Tribeca, include statement fabrics from GP & J Baker and Chelsea Textiles used for custom headboards, and Christopher Farr Cloth's signature prints covering restaurant chairs in a nod to the neighbourhood's textile heritage.

"You're trying to tell a story," Kemp says of her process, "so that when people come in, they're entering an invented world that is intriguing, fun, not too serious and makes them smile."

One of her contemporaries is Kelly Wearstler, whose work for Proper hotels includes the extravagant Moroccan-Mexican modernism of Downtown L.A. Proper and the boho glamour of San Francisco Proper (Wearstler says she imagined a well-travelled local woman called Gilda when choosing elements for this location). There's also Martin Brudnizki, a master of layering craft and charm. His eclectic style can be seen at Le Grand Mazarin in Paris – decked out in bomboniere-hued pastels with custom tapestry canopies over the beds – and the gritty glamour of London's Broadwick Soho.

Another designer who is both a pioneer and stalwart of maximalism is Bill Bensley, who, from his main base in Bangkok, has designed interiors for the Capella and Rosewood groups, as well his own Shinta Mani collection.

"I think people are simply tired of hotels that all look the same," he says of the new focus on opulence. "For years, there was a great appetite for quiet palettes, clean lines and interiors that were so restrained they could have been designed by a very tasteful ghost. There is nothing wrong with good minimalism, but when every hotel starts looking like the same hotel, travellers begin looking for something with a pulse."

Whether creating an urban refuge like The Siam in Bangkok or a tropical escape such as Capella Ubud, for Bensley, location is the key that unlocks a narrative. "I



Above: Forest Tent living room at Capella Ubud. Opposite: the lobby of Emporium Hotel South Bank.

always begin with a story, although I don't necessarily want to hand the guest a little booklet and say, 'Here is the story you must now understand.' That rather takes the fun out of it," he laughs. "The story should be there, whether you know it or not. It should be hidden in the objects, the architecture, the gardens, the colours and the little details. Then, if a guest becomes curious and starts asking questions, there's another layer waiting for them."

It's not just the heavy hitters leaning into a more playful approach. Indyk Architects embraced the building's theatrical past when designing the cinema-themed rooms and public spaces for 25hours Hotel The Olympia Sydney, while 1508 London and Singapore's EDG Design captured the location's identity as a garden city and Indonesia's modernist Jengki style for 25hours Hotel Jakarta The Oddbird. In Scotland, Russell Sage Studio included clues to local myths and nods to Islay's folklore and landscape in the 12 distinct rooms of Ardbeg House.

Meanwhile, at home, Anna Spiro's elegant pattern play at Cabarita Beach's Halcyon House endures, as do the bold public spaces of Emporium Hotel South Bank in Brisbane.

"Being independent, that was the starting point for us," says Emporium's co-owner and designer Francine John. "Because we're not an international brand there's no play book to follow, we could do whatever we wanted."

Her goal when creating the spaces was to make people who'd spent money on a room feel loved. "It was built on instinct and travel experiences," she explains. "I also think theatre is very important when you're doing a hotel because, in this day and age, everybody's on the run and everything's so impersonal. I'd like our clientele to feel like they're being looked after, they're being comforted, they're being acknowledged."

Her design solution was to create luxe, elegant rooms with incredible finishes – the gilded detailing around the televisions is just one example – while playing with mirrors, living walls, zebra print (a suggestion from her son after a safari trip) and red neon lighting in the public spaces. It is a best-of-both-worlds arrangement that pleases both sensory introverts and visual expressionists.

I'm yet to revisit *Koalaclava* but will soon be checking in to Glasgow's House of Gods, where the look – sleigh beds, animal print, oak panelling – is rock-and-roll opulence. Because what's the point in travelling if the arrival isn't fun? •