

In With the Old, In With the New

FOUR DESIGN-FOCUSED HOTELS
BREATHE NEW LIFE INTO HERITAGE
FLORENCE

By Natasha Nyanin

One of the defining characteristics of modern Italian interior design is its juxtaposition of old and new. And how could it not be so, in a country painted over by a patina of history, a country so teeming with iconic architecture, and so recognized as a pacesetter in all things design? Florence is a city especially emblematic of this penchant for a design ethos that pays homage to heritage while simultaneously expanding the horizon of what can be considered “classic.” Leading this charge are four bastions of hospitality in *The City of Lilies*.

IL TORNABUONI: A MODERN TAKE ON RENAISSANCE COLOR AND LIGHT

In late 2021, Florence’s newest five-star luxury lifestyle hotel, *Il Tornabuoni*, flung open its weighty wooden doors to guests, debuting The Unbound Collection by the Hyatt brand in Italy. Situated along Via Tornabuoni in the historic 12th-century Palazzo Minerbetti, the style-

forward hotel houses 62 elegantly designed rooms and suites envisioned by interior architect Andrea Auletta.

Auletta’s intention was to preserve and to enhance the palace’s ancient attributes: the facades, the entrance door, the stone staircase that anchors the building, the arches and frescoes in some rooms. They are all pieces of the whole whose integrity was honored while the architect took inspiration from them to choose fresh



The staircase of Il Tornabuoni, a new luxury hotel in Florence



A sumptuous room at Il Tornabuoni

shapes and materials in what he describes as “absolute respect for the original building.” He adds, “[I had to] define the boundary between the [original] elements to be valued and those to be inserted, looking for a magical equilibrium.”

A magical equilibrium he did find, softening the striking austerity and strong architectural characteristics and materials of the building with fanciful color and lush textural variation. “Color becomes a moment of joy and lightness,” Auletta says, “much like the Renaissance period, and the vibrant colors are indicative of this time of rebirth.” This sentiment explains his tendency to create sometimes unusual color combinations: warm shades of gray give way to

boisterous yellow, recalling sunrises and sunsets along the Arno, combined with anthracite and ivory. Then suddenly, on another floor, a shock of red tempered with burgundy and balanced with blues and dove greys arrests the eyes. Auletta uses color as a language and even designed custom wallpaper himself for the hotel as a dialect of that language. An idiom in his vernacular is the presence of animal motifs threaded through the décor — the wallpaper of the walls of *Il Magnifico*, the hotel’s bar, features little monkeys hanging from ropes and holding bottles of champagne, for example — to convey a sense of conviviality and offer a connection to nature.



Renaissance and modern touches collide at Il Tornabuoni



Lucie Gourmet Restaurant at Il Tornabuoni, evocative of a luxury train car

VELONA'S JUNGLE: WILD STYLE AND A LASTING FAMILY LINEAGE

Right in line with the theme of linking nature with luxury is *Velona's Jungle*, an inviting boutique hotel that beckons to travelers with an inclination toward the unusual. Each of the hotel's four suites is outfitted in wild whimsicality, from the verdant jungle foliage wallpaper of the 28-square-meter Durrel suite, the leopard-printed feature wall of the 25 square-meter Darwin suite, the headboard and decorative pillows festooned with green fronds reminiscent of the virgin rainforest in the 28 square-meter

Livingstone suite, to the tranquil gray and brown leaves of the 30 square-meter Fossey Suite's wallpaper.

In a nod to heritage, many of the objets d'art and furnishings of the hotel date from the mid-century during which the family's patriarch, who was a respected Florentine art dealer, began amassing collectibles from his travels through Italy and abroad. To create this *sui generis* home, his finds from sojourns in Florence, Rome, Naples, London, Paris, and Vienna in the 1950s are paired to perfection with antique and period furnishings from his gallery. But not content to let this hotel live only the past, subsequent



Details of the Livingstone Suite at Velona's Jungle

generations of the family have enhanced the original collection by curating, with the same care and compassion as their grandfather, works by contemporary artists and fabrics and decorative accents by distinctive designers. This is what Velona's Jungle does with distinction: it tells the story of a single family and the co-mingling of multiple eras, all with design as rhetorical device. On its surface, the safari-esque ethos may not scream "Renaissance", but in bringing together the sensibilities of the patriarch with the intuitions of the progeny, a Florentine star is born!



Art and antiques at Velona's Jungle



Eclectic touches at Velona's Jungle



The Fossey Suite at Velona's Jungle



Breakfast room at Velona's Jungle



Airy and stylish salon at AdAstra

AD ASTRA: STARRY NIGHTS AND GARDEN VIEWS

Speaking of stars, Ad Astra (Latin for “To the Stars”), a thoroughly modern hotel, stationed an easy 10-minute walk from the center of the city, more than holds its own in the constellation of Florentine heritage hotels with a contemporary bent. The property overlooks the largest private garden in Europe, one dotted with stone statues and featuring a neo-gothic observatory tower to the stars (from which one would imagine the hotel gets its name). In this ancestral mansion, beneath its frescoed high ceilings, Ad Astra marries the antique with 21st century taste.

Described by Vogue as “old world meets here and now”, the 14-room hotel’s vibrant interiors are a farrago of the historically classic and modern unorthodoxy.

In its King Balcony Suites, for example, a claw-foot tub shares space with the velvet upholstered bed, in the manner that is all the rage in hoteling these days. Yet over the minimalist, carré bed hangs an ornate crystal chandelier that harkens to a time long gone. The mélange of these diametrically opposed style ideals makes for a certain sumptuous design syncretism that owes it liturgy to the intermarriage of old and new.



Design and comfort details at Ad Astra, including a freestanding tub in every room

HELVETIA & BRISTOL: A DARING NEW WING TAKES FLIGHT

In perhaps no other Florentine hotel do old and new more symphonically harmonize than at the Hotel Helvetia & Bristol. Part of Starhotels Collezione, the building occupied by the hotel was constructed in the early 19th century as a private residence. A hotel since 1885, Helvetia & Bristol has become the Grande Dame of Florentine hospitality, sought after as much for its design as it is for its prime location just steps from Palazzo Strozzi, Brunelleschi's Dome and the shops on the via de Tornabuoni.

Over the past two years, the hotel has orchestrated a massive renovation and expansion

project and annexed an adjacent heritage building — what used to be the premises of the Banco di Roma — transforming it into the Bristol Wing, a stylistic contrast to the hotel's original Helvetia Wing.

Delivering this new vision for the Bristol Wing was designer Anouska Hempel, acclaimed for being the first to launch the “boutique hotel” concept in London in 1978. Her unmistakable Midas' touch emerges in all of its glory in this wing through the conversation unabashedly clean lines and reflective surfaces have with the intricacies of the original edifice and its opaque stone.



“I ... create the backdrop for other people to live their glorious lives in. It’s like a play that keeps on going and I give them the stage and the steam to keep running,” says Hempel. It is no surprise that she speaks of her work in the metaphor of the theatrical given the sophisticatedly operatic anima of the Bristol Wing that she has so expertly realized. Its 25 rooms were tackled with the exacting eye of a set designer: from splendid herringbone oak flooring to wainscoting, trimming, Italian silk shantung and velvet curtains, and opaline glass, to cast iron canopy beds in some rooms while others feature four poster beds of inlaid mirror framed by antiqued brass, materiality is the star of the show here. These elements were commissioned from and produced by renowned Italian artisans, such as Moleria Locchi, the glassmakers of Murano, Rubelli, Antico Setificio Fiorentino, Fiacchini, Anichini and Bronzet.

“Design follows where the imagination goes,” is what Hempel says. In the Bristol Wing, she has allowed her imagination to lead the way for the future, not to supplant the past, but cohabit with it dexterously and resonantly. What Hempel with this wing, Auletta with Il Tornabuoni, Velona’s Jungle and Ad Astra are doing through design is ensuring that Florence remains a living city, born anew into the modern

day while maintaining an atavistic connection to its heritage through its hospitality. After all, what can be more Florentine than the very concept of a renaissance?

Suite Bristol at Hotel Helvetia & Bristol





Lobby at Hotel Helvetia & Bristol