



# hospitality design

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## art and soul

finding inspiration from  
cultural influencers

**HD** *expo*  
a hospitality design event

perspectives interview **tal danai and adam d. tihany**

By Stacy Shoemaker Rauen



Tal Danai and Adam D. Tihany

## FOR ART'S SAKE

Two designers prove the power of good art



### How did you start ArtLink? What were you trying to create?

**Tal Danai:** The idea in '96 was that there's a huge crowd of yuppies—young people working days and nights earning a lot of money buying every product that is placed under their noses and having white walls in their houses. On the other hand, God knows how many young artists were struggling to enter the market all over the world with no success because there was no segment in the art market that was ready to accept them. There was an opportunity to put the two groups together and create a new segment.

The first thing I did was call in David Rhodes, the president of the School of Visual Arts in New York, who signed up almost instantaneously, and then I sat down to write a business plan. Ten months later, Sotheby's joined us. (It's the first time in Sotheby's history that they gave association by name to anyone.), and from being this megalomaniac startup that wants



1. An ArtLink installation at the Park Plaza Victoria London.

to change the world and do all those things, we became the market. The rest was about eight years of developing an international marketplace, including getting all the dealers involved, the logistics, the price structures, and so on, and holding the exhibitions and auctions we held with Sotheby's around the world.

### How did you two meet?

**Adam D. Tihany:** The first project that I do remember being actively involved with Tal was for Heston Blumenthal's Dinner in London and it was this pineapple, the entrance piece that he developed, and it became sort of an iconic art piece. Then, we hadn't seen each other for quite a while after that. We saw each other socially, but we hadn't worked together until last year when some opportunities came about.

We have three big projects, and part of my contract with the client is that I get to pick the art consultant and I get to try to manage them, which is almost impossible. Usually the owner commissions the art separately or they have an art consultant, but in this particular case, it's really that they just said, 'No, you deal with it.

Put it in your contract and you deliver the goods.' That was an interesting way of getting involved with somebody intimately from level zero, conceiving the project together, and discussing the philosophy.

### How does your process work?

**AT:** It's a disaster.

**TD:** The advantage of working with a designer that has done so much and is so confident in his work is it gives me the freedom to say whatever I think, whatever I want, to push whatever I need to push. And I know that if I get 'No' from the other side, it's not because the designer is trying to protect an ego or is too insecure about his position in the game, but it's a reason that has to

perspectives **interview tal danai and adam d. tihany**



2

**2+3.** Two Tihany and Danai-designed projects: Holland America's ms Koningsdam cruise ship with a custom sculpture 30 feet in diameter in its three-story atrium, and the floating pineapple at Dinner by Heston Blumenthal at the Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park London.



3

do with the overall look of the project at the end. **AT:** Tal and I had numerous philosophical discussions about what is art, what does it mean for our project, what does it mean in general. For us, this is not about decorations. All of the art that we do together is site specific. It has to do with the design, it has to do with the location, it has to do with an overall philosophy of what do we want to

convey in terms of the end result of the project. What is the message? The second part of the equation, which is even more complicated than Tal and I working together, is the client. The client in some instances is very sophisticated. They view art as an expression of culture, of sophistication, of knowledge. Some of them view it as an

investment, so it's even getting a third dimension. But for some clients it's purely decorative. That's when we try to turn the client around by asking him, 'Why is there a piece of art hanging in a hotel room? Why is it not a mirror? Can you tell me why you think your customer walks into a luxury hotel room and expects to see art on the wall? Why isn't it another bigger television?'

By provoking that answer, you make them consider that it's not a decorative thing, it's actually a cultural phenomenon. And if it is a cultural phenomenon, then Tal comes in with his background and knowledge and how he interprets that particular culture or that particular customer that will walk into the room, and what would they expect to get from the art besides just a picture hanging on a wall?

**TD:** The industry calls our discipline art consultants. But the work we do, and especially the work we do with Adam, is why I prefer to be called an art designer. There are so many different aspects of going into why should there be this or that image or sculpture in a space? Yes, we can just put in the nicest thing we find. But we can also put something that will at least attempt to add another layer to the space, and that's a much more interesting process. I have to make sure that when the guest leaves the hotel they remember where they were. And hopefully they want to come back.

**AT:** In many instances, Tal and I start to talk about the project as we conceive the project. He's not brought into the project at the end where everything is designed and I say, 'I have a blank wall here, what am I going to do about it?' During the design process I say, 'I have a problem with these two decks of a cruise ship, and I don't know how to connect them. What can we do to make a stair be a piece of art? How do we bring art into this that it's not like a sitting sculpture right in front of me but the stair itself is an art piece? Do you have any ideas?'

This is how this whole process works. It's art design. Given that, I would say 75 percent of what we do on these projects is totally site specific and custom; it's not something we buy from a shelf.

**TD:** That is something I would never have imagined. This is a unique way of working. We work with many designers all over the world. You have to be an extremely confident designer to be able to bring the art in at such an early stage and give it the space within your design and think

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about your design with the art. It's not a given. It's not an obvious process because in most processes art comes at the end. To be able to bring it at such an early stage and incorporate it into the thinking process of the design, that's the exception and that's why I love working with Adam.

## **How do you find the artists that you need for these types of projects?**

**TD:** The nice thing about working on the ArtLink@Sotheby's International program with Sotheby's for so many years is that we operate in 150 art galleries in 44 countries. If you figure how many students there are in any given four-year program or master's program wherever they are, and the faculty members and the alumni, we have access now to tens of thousands of artists. Whatever challenge is thrown our way, we have a group of relevant artists we can address who can bring their friends or their teachers or their students to the table as well and give us the ability to really get interesting answers in return.

## **In terms of art, what do guests look for today, and how do you think that's changed since you both started?**

**TD:** It's very different from one hotel to the other, from one city to the other, from one type of guest to the other. When I go to a hotel, I want to have an experience. I'm not going to have an experience if all the group that was involved in developing the hotel was concerned with making sure I'm not offended, because that ends up the blandest you can get.

**AT:** We operate in a very rarified field of 5-Star luxury product. The consumer of this product is a relatively sophisticated and wealthy person who probably in their home has art or has art awareness or went to a museum more than once in their lives. They are people that fully understand the cultural implication of what it means to have good art. They may not be able to judge whether it's good or bad but they certainly expect that piece of art on the wall because that shows that you are a sophisticated person. That's

how they were brought up. We owe them respect, and we owe them the same attention that is being put into selecting a 400-thread count sheet or a great faucet for the bathroom or good lighting. It's got to be the same kind of attention that you put into what you hang on the walls. It's the same thought process. All of these things somehow speak to you.

Art is totally subjective—some people love it, some people hate it. The arts, that's what enriches our life. We listen to music, and we look at paintings. It is part of our DNA. If you are trying to convey that to somebody, you have to pay attention. It's not just an afterthought; it's not just 'OK, let's buy art by the number.' We need to think this through.

**TD:** At the end of the day, it's a dialogue and it's a mutual effort to make sure that we explain why we think something should be in and something else shouldn't. **hd**



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