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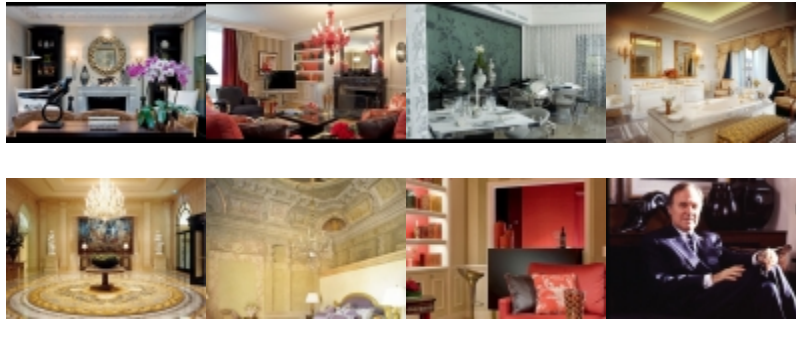
## Pierre-Yves Rochon: Keeping Luxe Alive

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The luxury set's go-to hotel designer talks about the business of upscale design in a down market.

By [Mary Scoviak](#)

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*After 30 years of spreading his gospel of easy elegance, Pierre-Yves Rochon's name is synonymous with modern luxury. Normally, that would be a good thing. It's why most of the hotel chains and dozens of independents that command \$400-plus per night average rates have come calling with the most interesting commissions around. And it's a major force in his Paris-based firm's growth into one of the world's 20 largest hospitality interior design specialists. But how do these credentials work when the global economy is taking a beating? Not badly, says the French native. He shares his ideas on the right look and the right operations approach for weathering this storm.*

### **How are your current designs balancing five-star expectations with the mood of austerity?**

The 1930s are definitely an influence. This was an age that saw the dawning of contemporary design. These styles remain timeless. Mies van der Rohe's "Barcelona" chair is as relevant today as it was decades ago. We're also integrating more art that's influenced by the simplicity of African, Oceanic and so-called "primitive" styles. The look suggests a new kind of luxury. It's chic but not out of touch.

### **Are you seeing pullbacks in the pace of RFPs as investors get nervous?**

We currently have numerous projects on our boards from Chicago and Paris to Taipei and Bahrain and we expect to see more from the largest luxury operators. Fortunately, we are in a slightly different position than

some other ateliers. We have great collaborative relationships with hospitality brands such as Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts, Orient-Express Hotels, The Ritz-Carlton and The Peninsula Hotels. Most of the hotels we design continue to seek our services for years to keep them fresh. For example, we're doing a Hollywood-inspired suite at the Four Seasons Hotel George V in Paris to create a more contemporary premium offer. So we have a steady stream of renovation work. Times are challenging, certainly. But hotels are still opening and being redesigned in all parts of the world.

**Do owners and operators want safer design now, either for psychological or fiscal reasons?**

Owners and operators hire us because they want design that respects the history and architecture of the hotel building. They're looking to us to draw out and celebrate classical features while, at the same time, understanding that this is the modern world. Guests expect the latest design elements and conveniences, whatever the age of the hotel. I like design that flows from that juxtaposition. It is timeless without becoming boring. And that protects the owner's investment. Part of the designer's aim for any project should be to add value and raise standards, along with enhancing the brand and the guest experience.

**Describe your design process.**

I never have any preconceived notion before embarking on a new design. I consider the context of the city, the neighborhood, the building-both its history and its condition-the owner's concerns and ambitions and, of course, the brand and what guests expect from it. This is how I edit myself. It's why the Four Seasons George V is so different from the Sofitel Chicago or why L'Atelier Joël Robuchon in New York is not the same style as Joël Robuchon at the Mansion [at MGM Grand] in Las Vegas.

**What mistakes do designers make when they begin filling in interior spaces?**

Looking only at the parts and not the whole. When I was young, I wanted to be a film director. To this day, I view the spaces I design as if they were a film set. You must study the interior architecture, of course. But you also have to think about the furniture, the flowers, sometimes even the music that will be played to achieve the full mood.

Designers make a big mistake if they don't take time to discover what lies under the surface of the building. Before they pick up a pencil, they need to learn as much as possible about the structure, whether new or historic. I ask for original drawings, photographs, anything that will help me understand the foundation. The design should be about the building; it shouldn't be about the designer's ego.

**Why did you decide to open a North American office in 2007, and why choose Chicago?**

I love Chicago because of its great architecture. The town reminds me of 1930s movies. I love the black-and-white films of that period. More to the point, we worked with architect Perkins+Will's Chicago-based team on the Sofitel there. That's what led to our selecting Chicago and why Perkins+Wills is our parent company now.

**What are the best strategies for supporting a single international office?**

My wife [Annick Rochon, a Sorbonne graduate in charge of the firm's FF&E programs] and I spend a week a month in the Chicago office working with our project team and getting to know the city. This is very important

for a firm with an office abroad. The principals have to take a hands-on approach, just as they do in their home office. I spend a lot of my time working with my project teams. I know I'm lucky to have a dedicated staff that helps me realize my design ideas. Telecommuting can't create that kind of rapport.

### **With all you've accomplished, what's still on your wish list?**

I want to continue to grow the company, of course. Personally, I would love to design a hotel from the ground up: the architecture, the interiors, even the landscaping.

### **Sidebar: Portrait of the Artist**

After a youth informed by living in a series of countries, Breton-born Pierre-Yves Rochon was having a hard time deciding between a career in music or film. His love of painting, augmented by a resolve not to have to do the same thing twice, swung the balance toward studies in fine arts and interior design. He paid his dues with a decade of work for various contemporary interior designers, trying out styles from traditional European to what he terms "wildly futuristic." His client base was primarily offices and banks. Then came the project that changed his life: the Château Les Crayères in Reims. From the outset, Rochon saw the infinite possibilities afforded by hotel design and the opportunity to unleash his creative curiosity. It didn't take long for him to take the plunge and open his own eponymous Paris-based firm in 1979.

Though he has established himself as one of the world's premier luxury hotel designers, not much else has changed in terms of Rochon's work style. He still approaches projects with a high level of personal involvement and a spirit that thrives on team work. It doesn't hurt that some of the clients on his team are among the highest profile players in their fields: Isadore Sharpe, founder, chairman and ceo of Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts; super-star chefs such as Joël Robuchon, Alain Ducasse and Paul Bocuse; and the investors and proprietors who bankrolled work at grande dames such as the Hotel du Lac in Vevey and very au courant boutiques like the Hotel Keppler in Paris. He may be best-known for his ultra-luxe commissions, but Rochon has translated those best practices with equal ease to Sofitel, Le Meridien, InterContinental and Grand Hyatt. He even took it to the masses with the sleek/chic interiors for Bocuse's France L'Ouest Express restaurants.

After dozens of awards and worldwide recognition of his body of work, the 62-year-old Rochon says it's curiosity that keeps him wanting the next project. "It's the most important quality to have, not just in design, but in life," he says. Why not be curious in posh retirement in his home in Brittany-free from jet lag and job pressures? "Each day I'm allowed to dream. How many people can say that? This is what I enjoy doing most. I have to admit I find myself drawing even when I'm at home," he says.

### **Sidebar: On Rochon's Drawing Board**

- Four Seasons Hotel, Chicago
- [completed] Four Seasons Nile Plaza, Cairo
- Hotel Baur au Lac, Zurich
- Hotel Casino Barriere, Lille
- Hotel Ritz, Madrid
- Hotel Ritz, Paris
- Hotel Warwick, Paris
- Le Meridien, Prague

- Principe di Savoia, Milano
- Ritz-Carlton II, Bahrain
- Shangri-La, Paris
- Sofitel Old Cataract, Aswan
- The Savoy, London
- L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon, Taipei