COMMERCIAL
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SPECIAL REPORT
UAE LEADS FIT-OUT SPEND

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE
INSIDE DIFC'S AMAZÓNICO

meet the MASTER
The man behind the interiors of Zuma and Roka

March 2020

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LW Design and the brief to bring colour and comfort to this Mexican restaurant.





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TALES OF DESIGN FROM MEXICO

LW DESIGN TAKES US INTO THE COLOURFUL WORLD OF MR. TACO

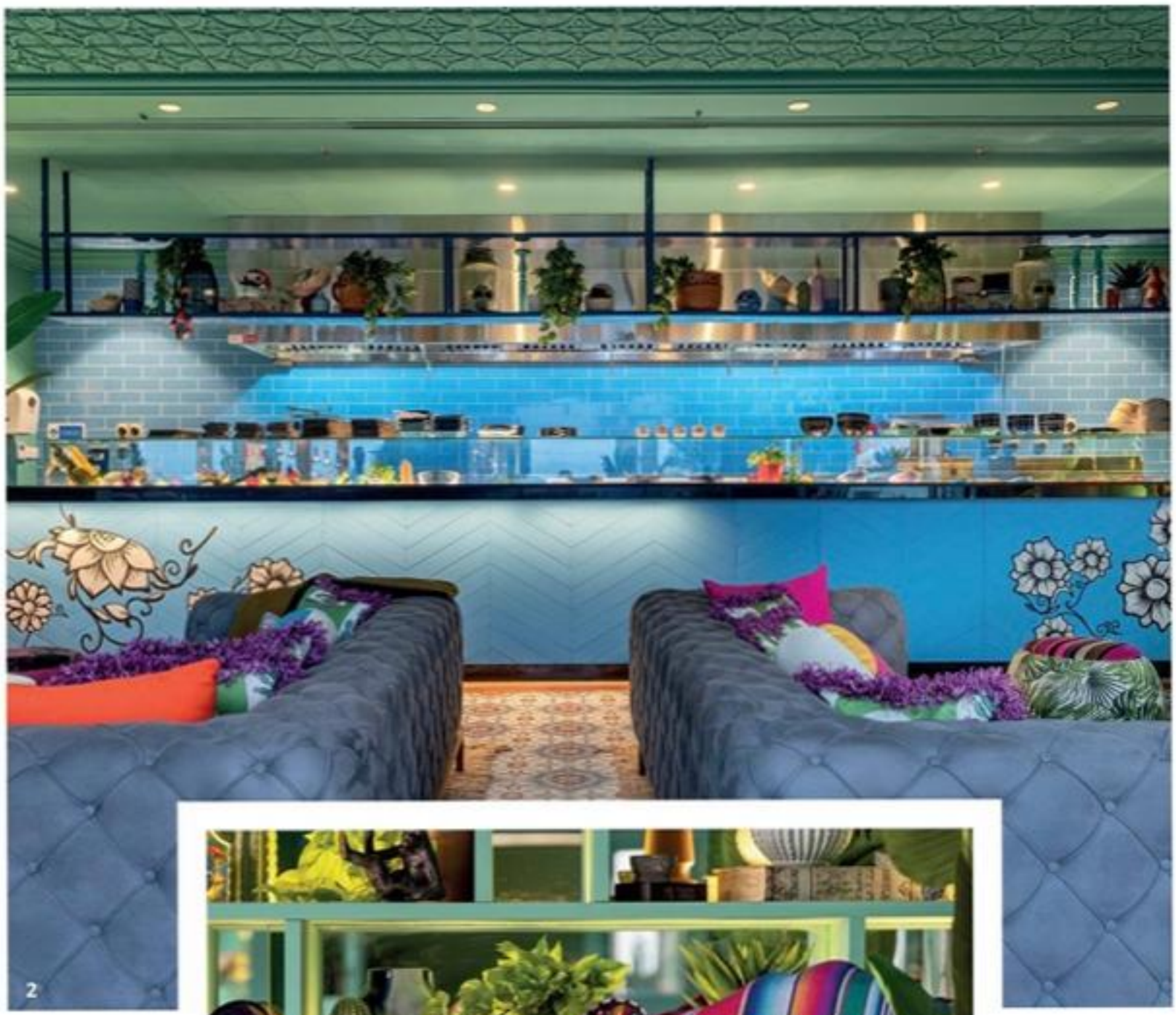
WORDS BY: NADINE KAHIL

1
Design to inspire talking and sharing

When one of the world's leading design firms is given an exciting, vibrant brief, you know you're in for something special. This was certainly the case when *Commercial Interior Design* award winners LW Design Group were commissioned to create the interiors for Mr. Taco, a Mexican restaurant in Dubai's Le Royal Méridien Resort & Spa. We talk to the designers about their firm, their work and trends in hospitality interior design.

No tale about Mr. Taco would be complete without taking a look at the firm that revamped its interiors to such great success. In 2019,







LW Design Group did something remarkable. Or rather, they did something remarkable, again.

Last year saw the international design firm, which has offices in Brazil, Hong Kong and the UAE, win the Commercial Interior Design Awards Interior Design Firm of the Year for an unprecedented fourth time. Founded in 1999 by Jesper Godsk, the firm has gone from strength to strength. Over 100 staff work in three offices, with one in Aarhus, Denmark, opening in the next few months.

The firm's outlook is based around spaces that engage and dialogue with the local culture through pinpoint accuracy and detailing. With a vast portfolio of over 200 restaurants and hotels, LW Design Group has worked with a series of well-known names in Dubai, including The Accor Group,

2
A show kitchen tempts guests inside

3
Bold colours mix with antique elements



Al Futtaim Group, Dubai International Airport, Emaar Properties, and Emirates Airlines.

Designers Rachel Kidd and Jacqueline Craft worked together to refurbish and revitalize Mr. Taco's distinctive interiors. A smaller space than LW Design Group typically works with, Mr. Taco presented challenges along the way. Nevertheless, the refurbishment was an unbridled success, resulting in a unique space that speaks of authentic Mexican experiences and that is a wonderful environment in which to dine.

At the client's request, the contemporary Mexican-inspired interior was firmly aimed at the Instagram generation and sought to engage the senses and the younger generation's design to communicate and tell their own stories. Kidd and Craft worked to create a unique interior, one that spoke of identity and individualism. "Our clients often ask for a feature that will be Instagrammed and remembered.

Whether it is an artwork, a caption, a sculpture, there needs to be something that engages with the customer and guest," said Kidd.

Mr. Taco's bold colour gradients speak of a desire to stand out, to be remembered and to be spoken about. This wasn't by accident, according to Craft: "There has been a strong focus on colour recently. We have become quite bold with our colour selections and combinations and are using more colour throughout our schemes, using striking coloured marbles, decorative floor patterns, coloured accent furniture pieces, bold coloured artwork and a mix of soft furnishings."

Another key element was the desire to tell a story – to take guests on a journey as they dined.

"The restaurant needs to have an identity and needs to be somewhere people want to be seen. The new trendy place to visit. The restaurant needs to have energy and provide a story," said Craft. A key element of telling Mr. Taco's story was the furniture and fixtures that make up so much of the experience.

"In order for the design to tell a story we need to ensure all elements play a part. We carefully consider our material selections and the FF&E often plays a big role, adding softness and drama to a space. We curate our selections as you would a home. Each piece has its own reason and purpose for being there. This attention to detail creates interest and depth to the space. We always accessorise our restaurants ourselves and strive to source unique pieces. These finishing touches really bring the spaces to life and help with the restaurant's unique identity," Kidd explained.

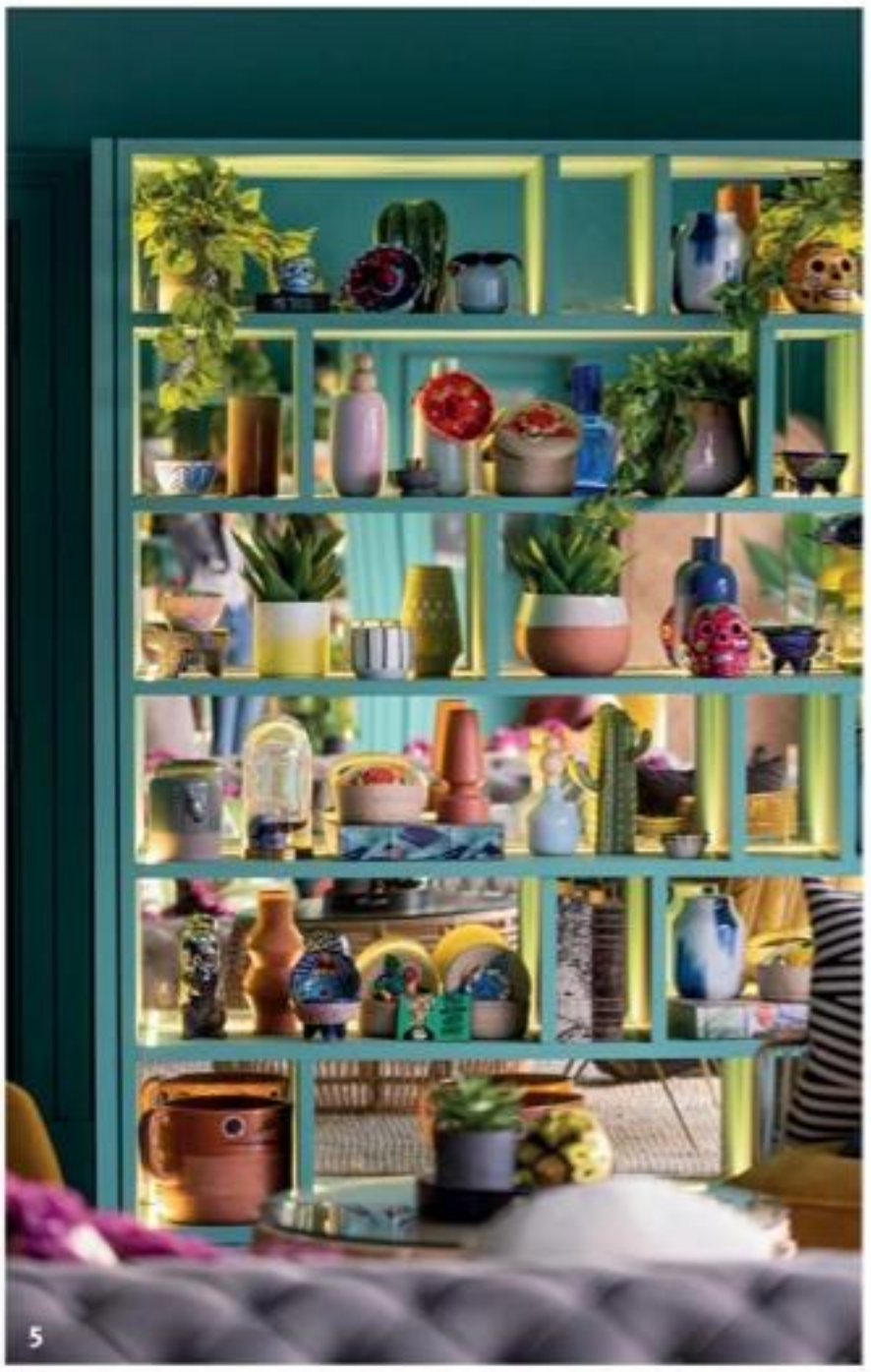
The welcoming, comfortable seating and other design elements embrace Mr. Taco's concept of loyal to Mexican design with an interior is holistic, inviting and warm.It is within this context that LW Design Group's approach is to be understood. The interior was designed to feel as if guests were entering someone's home.

The eclectic mix of furniture – mostly sourced from local companies, including Marina Home, MishMashi and Indigo – soft furnishings and accessories reminds you of a private space, created to one person's (very

4 Bold furniture pieces accent the space

5 Quirky touches that are good for the 'gram

6 Soft materials for an inviting interior


5


6

sophisticated) taste. Potentially disparate, the pieces in fact come together to create a whole.

Kidd says: "Some pieces could seem quite random but they tell a story. We re-finished several pieces of furniture that were tired and brought them back to life by painting them vibrant colours and upholstering feature chairs in fabric sourced from Mexico. We sourced traditional decorative pieces from Mexico and mixed them with some very contemporary items to give the lounge a twist. The internal area wasn't activated previously, as everyone wanted to be on the terrace. Now it is cosy and is activated with the show kitchen it has become an extension of the popular outside space."

The result is a figurative 'opening up' of the space, making use of an interior that previously was not the star of the show.

One archetypal element of traditional Mexican design is the prevalence of the colour teal. Here Mr. Taco doesn't disappoint. Upon entering the restaurant, guests are greeted with vivid turquoise elements, traditional Mexican Calavera graffiti and Rob Perryman slogans.

"We decided to be bold and paint all walls and ceilings the teal colour. We worked with the existing materials and patterns and painted over them, which has helped create layers to the space. We wanted the space to feel playful and lively. The graphic graffiti art appears throughout the space and creates photo opportunities," said Kidd.

This fun, exciting environment is ripe for communicating and eating. The menu is entirely authentic, but contemporary twists take the experience to another level as the focus here is clearly on sharing and having fun while enjoying a fantastic meal. If guests happen to snap a shots to post to Instagram, so much the better.

Meeting Mr. Taco posed a variety of challenges for the design team. A 'less is more' approach was taken to



7 Accessories sourced from Mexico

8 Vivid teal walls make a bold statement

the interiors and all of the furniture was chosen from local retailers to reduce costs and create a design that was on budget and as local as possible.

By using the existing floors and tile sets, the redesign was both sustainable and affordable. All the major changes were undertaken using paint and graphic elements. As a result, the existing interiors were brought to life, rather than entirely revamped. The existing fixtures and spaces were given a fresh new look, the kitchen was largely untouched and even the interior walls remained in place.

"The scope, budget and timeframe was a lot smaller than our usual projects which was a challenge, but fun! The majority of FF&E was procured locally with some accessories and fabrics sourced in Mexico with the help from the clients team. We had a vision but didn't present visuals as it was fast track. We designed as we went, knowing that we couldn't exceed the limited budget. To create a new destination with a new identity with these limitations was definitely a new experience," said Craft.

The end result is a testament to ingenuity and clever design on a relative budget - a fun and authentic experience that's full of engaging elements.

With its contemporary design elements and its clear Mexican heritage, Mr. Taco is a fun place to be. A little quirky and it's all part of the charm, as antique elements mix with bold colours to create an energising and memorable evening. Statement design pieces, traditional patterns and local materials – many of which were sourced from Mexico - all combine to leave guests with a true, fun Mexican experience.

Mr. Taco is certainly aimed at the younger generation, something that's clear from the design language throughout the interiors. Sophisticated, clever and very much contemporary, the restaurant speaks to a generation who are all about sharing, both in terms of the food they eat and the stories they create and tell. With accents and details rich in Mexican heritage and a colourful menu to back them up, Mr. Taco is both a place to be seen and a place in which to enjoy great food. That the project was planned and executed quickly and to a limited budget make the end result all the more remarkable.