

Huntley Santa Monica Beach

EARTH AND SEA INSPIRE
A SINGULAR COASTAL REFUGE

Interior Design by Thomas Schoos Design
Text by Kelly Vencill Sanchez/Photography by Scott Frances

Designer Thomas Schoos and project designer Yvonne Shaw transformed the Huntley Santa Monica Beach, near Los Angeles. THIS IMAGE: Schoos mounted fish on a wall in the lobby to emphasize the proximity to the water. Rich woods, a mix of light and dark hues, and varied textures enliven the space and set the tone for the rest of the hotel. BELOW: The lobby's reception area.



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The lobby of the Huntley Santa Monica Beach offers the first clue that it's not your typical seaside hotel. Wanting guests to be immersed in the life aquatic the moment they step inside, designer Thomas Schoos knew he needed something special. And then it hit him: a wall of fish. But not just any fish—lacquered white and lit by spotlights, hundreds of piranhas beckon visitors (and not just those under five) to reach out and touch them. “Everyone talks about them,” he says, smiling.

The California hotel's owner, Sohrab Sassounian, needed a little convincing before coming around to the idea. But in the end he agreed—he'd hired Schoos to

transform the midrange hotel into a boutique property precisely because of his strikingly modern sensibility and playful style.

“There are so many iconic hotels in Los Angeles; we knew we needed a dramatic design statement that would evolve over time,” Sassounian explains. “We approached Thomas after seeing his work and fell in love with his vision of a beachside escape that was both luxurious and chic but didn't sacrifice comfort.”

With business partner Michael Berman, the German-born Schoos has created restaurants (Los Angeles's O-Bar and Koi, among them) and opened a “lifestyle” design studio in West Hollywood, but the Huntley was his first hotel. Undaunted,





For the restaurant, Penthouse, “we wanted people to feel they were on the beach,” says Shaw. She and Schoos, along with colleague Uwe Freyer, favored a pale palette to evoke the sea, and Schoos devised chairs with backs shaped like dolphins’ tails. The chairs are placed by one of the room’s cabanas—movable banquettes with curtains that allow a secluded dining experience.

he sized up what he had to work with: an 18-story building several blocks from the ocean. He may have lacked hotel experience, but his history with restaurants had taught him about utilizing space, while his training as a painter had given him an understanding of color and light.

At the Huntley, Schoos has deftly delivered. The lobby is a coolly impressive starting point, where silvered sea fans are mounted behind a reception desk inlaid with shagreen. But there are more than marine references here. Schoos and project designer Yvonne Shaw have emphasized natural materials that are all

about texture: carved African daybeds and drum tables, curving chairs of stack laminate, plush lamb’s-wool rugs and pillows and soft, leather-covered benches and chairs.

Schoos delights in what he describes as “bringing together flavors that don’t match. It begins a conversation, which is what design is all about. It’s a language of the senses.”

From the lobby, one ascends to the remarkably airy guest rooms. On a clear day, they afford views that even seasoned Angelenos would gasp at. City zoning regulations prevented them from altering

the 1966 structure, so Schoos and Shaw focused their attention on maximizing light and space without adding balconies or expanding the windows.

“People come to Santa Monica to experience the easy, breezy feeling of the beach,” Schoos offers. “I wanted to bring that free spirit to everything. These rooms have to suit a global personality glove.”

Indeed, there are pieces from Ivory Coast, South Africa, India, Central America, Java and Bali. But there are no artworks on the walls. “Everyone does the picture over the bed,” says Schoos. “I wanted the rooms to be very simple and clean.”

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TOP: The designers opted for a clubby aesthetic in the fireside lounge, located within the restaurant, using wing chairs and vintage lamps and mirrors. Maya Romanoff wallcovering. Pillow fabric, Pollack. ABOVE: In one of the Signature suites, as elsewhere, explains Schoos, he and his team simply “created a cocoon to land in.” The mirror swivels to reveal an LG television, at Abt.com.



ABOVE: Mirrors on a wall in the Presidential Suite “add volume to the living area,” notes Shaw, while the floor lamp and chandeliers provide glamour. The oil is by Schoos, who studied painting before shifting his focus to design. **OPPOSITE:** Sheers separate the suite’s bedroom from its bath, enhancing the loftlike qualities of the space.

The suites fall into two categories: the north-facing Malibu suites and the south-facing Signature suites. But no matter what the orientation, Schoos’s feeling for texture and his unique brand of simplicity are evident throughout. Against a sea of neutrals, the brick tone of the long banquettes echoes the red-tile roofs visible through the windows. The tactile again figures prominently: sandblasted-oak beams, rift-sawn-oak headboards and trim, barrel chairs covered in pigskin made to look like python, thick alpaca rugs.

In the Malibu suites, “barn doors”—sliding panels of sandblasted oak—divide sitting and sleeping areas, while upholstered alcoves are snug spots to relax or read.

“Hotel rooms traditionally have a big writing desk,” Schoos notes. “But today most people sit with their laptop on the bed.”

To date, his firm has designed 15 suites in the hotel, in addition to the spacious 17th-floor Presidential Suite, where Venetian-plaster walls and gauzy sheers set off a palette of turquoise and silver. To capitalize on the light, Schoos designed three huge mirrors that rest against a wall.

One floor above, the 360-degree view from the popular Penthouse restaurant is dazzling. “It had to work for all three meals, so we wanted a lighter feeling,” explains Shaw, who worked closely with the firm’s director of design, Gary Churukian, on the space. “Being able to see the water

gives you the sense of being outside.” The banquettes in the central bar area, each with its own chandelier and hung with a sheer fabric, offer a witty take on the beach cabana. Guests can also have a drink beneath the retractable skylight in the fireside lounge, where Schoos designed leather-upholstered armchairs that seat two. Just over the fireplace, a wall shimmers with insets of mother-of-pearl. Oceanside luxury never looked so magical. □

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