

PAST MASTERS

Hotelier Liran Wizman and architect Piero Lissoni join forces with Ian Schrager to give a crumbling Milanese palazzo contemporary appeal

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDY MASSACCESI WRITER: LAURA MAY TODD

Just a stone's throw from Milan's Duomo, amid the whizzing drone of motorbikes bouncing along the cobbled streets and the din of passing trams, sits a regal palazzo. Built during Italy's Risorgimento period, it is dusty and faded from disuse, having been locked away for decades. In fact, most locals have little idea that behind the grand façade of Corinthian pilasters lies a hidden world of neoclassical elegance. Slip through the entrance and an expansive courtyard opens up before you: reflected sky and carvings dancing across glazed colonnades. Even by Milanese standards, it's impressive.

For years, the city tried to sell it but to no avail; the 2008 financial crisis discouraged local buyers from taking on a vast, complicated restoration process. But in 2016, Amsterdam-based hotelier Liran Wizman and his group, Europe Hotels Private Collection (EHPC), quietly bought it at auction for an undisclosed amount. A year later, Wizman announced that the property would become part of Ian Schrager's Edition Hotels portfolio. Designed by Milanese architect Piero Lissoni, it will be the first Edition on Italian soil.

We catch up with Wizman a few days before the palazzo is sealed for the two year-long restoration process. He's an anomaly in a hospitality industry largely populated by brash personalities; soft-spoken and laidback, he also looks a decade younger than his 42 years, with the ruffled air of the perpetually jet-lagged, having arrived in Milan late the night before. He jets off again once we conclude the tour.

Born in Tel Aviv, Wizman began his career as a lawyer and economist, segueing into property development in 2001 by slowly redeveloping hotels across Europe. His moment of revelation came five years later, after purchasing the Park Hotel in Amsterdam. 'I wanted, one time, to go all the way,' he says of the project, which transformed a stuffy business inn in the Museum Quarter into a boutique hotel. Enamoured with the creative process that went into the Park Hotel, he launched his brand, Sir, in 2013, followed by the younger-skewed Max Brown in 2014. Both are design-focused and cater to a generation of Airbnb weekenders, offering bespoke city tours and 24-hour brunches. Since opening in Amsterdam, EHPC has also settled in Berlin, Hamburg, Dusseldorf and Ibiza, with a new project in Barcelona on the way.

But in Milan, such a grand location needed a host to match. 'I felt that Edition had the right elegance,' says Wizman of his decision to partner with Schrager, 'but it's also very playful.' The collaboration is a first for notorious micromanager Schrager, who has never released so much creative control to another party. The rooms will be his; the restaurants and public spaces will be managed by Wizman's Entourage Group.

'Hotels in Milan are too secluded,' laments Wizman, wandering through the glass arcade of the palazzo's second floor, footsteps crunching over decades-old detritus. 'I love those hotels, but [they are] very private. I like to see people. I have an office, but I sit in my restaurant instead.' Wizman's objective is to recreate the magic of his Park Hotel project, using the same formula that has seen him turn a historic warehouse in Hamburg into the Sir Nikolai and join the Telephone Exchange to the Kas Bank building on Dam Square to create the W Amsterdam. In true Edition fashion, 50 per cent of the sprawling floor plan will be dedicated to public space, with enough amenities to coax the conservative Milanese out from behind their velvet ropes and into the lobby. 'I could choose to make another 20 rooms,' says Wizman of his decision to double down on social areas, 'but I don't believe in that. What would that make us – another old-person hotel?'

When the hotel opens in 2020, the Duchess restaurant will occupy its cavernous main volume. Upstairs will be the Japanese/South American-inspired Izakaya – an unbuttoned linen shirt to the Duchess's starched collar – with Soho House-style terrace and swimming pool. There will also be a subterranean bar and spa. The Edition's 116 rooms, featuring dramatic arched windows, vaulted ceilings and generous floor plans, will line the building's exterior façade, while private dining spaces will ring the interior, overlooking the courtyard. The tiled roof will be peeled back so a third floor of suites with private terraces can be built. Lissoni is tasked with the rooms and social spaces, but for the restaurants, Wizman enlisted his long-time collaborator, Tel-Aviv's Baranowitz + Kronenberg.

The project is a picture-perfect setting for Lissoni's brand of clean-lined minimalism. As the only local on board, he felt a duty to represent his home town. 'This is, after all, a city of design,' he says. The plan is to intervene as little as possible in the space and, where significant additions are required, use 'Milanese materials'. The floor will be in a 'classical terrazzo, but reinvented in a completely modern way'; the furniture a 'mix of contemporary and antique' for a 'thoroughly Milanese project with an international soul'.

There's a long way to go before the palazzo's heavy doors can swing open. 'It's a millefeuille,' says Lissoni. Its origins date from the 17th century, with successive renovations haphazardly stacked and spliced into its elegant frame. The bulk of what exists today dates from the 1860s, when architect Agostino Nazari transformed it for the Society for the Encouragement of Arts and Crafts. Bombed in the Second World War, it became a campus for the University of Milan, an office of the electoral register, and at one stage a police station. >>

ARCHITECT PIERO LISSONI (LEFT) AND HOTELIER LIRAN WIZMAN IN MILAN'S (MOSTLY) 19TH-CENTURY PALAZZO DI PORTA ROMANA. A TWO-YEAR RESTORATION WILL TURN IT INTO A NEW HOTEL FOR IAN SCHRAGER'S EDITION GROUP





THIS PICTURE, FEATURING CARVED NICHEs AND A SWEEPING GLASS CUPOLA, THE BUILDING'S MAIN SPACE WILL HOUSE THE DUCHESS RESTAURANT
BELOW, BEHIND ARCHED WINDOWS, PRIVATE DINING SPACES WILL RING THE INTERNAL COURTYARD

The surgeries performed, like the insertion of ticket office-style windows, concrete stairways punched through vaulted ceilings and terrazzo poured over stone floors, have left scars. The greatest affront is the corrugated plastic plastered over the opulent glass cupola. 'The idea,' says Lissoni sweeping his arm out in front of him like a game show host, 'is to feel like you're in a palace again.'

This being Italy, restoring the building won't be straightforward. The palazzo is under the highest level of protection for historic structures, and the changes permitted are frustratingly minimal. 'People were afraid to buy this building because of it,' Wizman explains. 'We didn't know - maybe that's why we weren't afraid.' For example, remnants of ancient walls were discovered beneath the foundations, forcing Lissoni to rethink his approach for the spa. He eventually decided to incorporate the crumbling antique columns into the hotel's underground pool. As a local, Lissoni was an asset in navigating arcane planning laws. This is the first time he's undertaken such a project on his home turf, and the pressure is on.

Yet Lissoni couldn't have picked a better moment to stage a homecoming. Milan is on an upswing, propelled by the energy of the 2015 Expo and the continued success of Salone del Mobile. In 2016, the city even outpaced Rome and Venice for hotel room occupancy, and there are no signs of that slowing. But for Wizman, the motivation was more than just business. 'In Milan you have design, fashion, you have all of these creative people. You go to a restaurant and Roberto Cavalli, Giorgio Armani, or the Dsquared2 guys are just sitting there. You look at all of them together and you think: Wow, this is just where they hang out. This is their city. People deserve to discover that.' *

editionhotels.com; chpc.com

