

Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz

Award winning designer will transform Scottsdale's Mondrian

By J.K. Purcell

Can you imagine a hotel that offers a stylish experience, and the opportunity to heighten your personal profile? If you can't, one designer is helping to make that possible. Recognized as one of the most influential interior designers, Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz brings his interior design vision to the Valley in a big way.

How did the designer/architect, who was named one of America's "Most Brilliant Decorators" for eight consecutive years by *House Beautiful*, find his way here?

"I kind of fell into it. They called me to see if I wanted to do the hotel," says Noriega-Ortiz. The company in question is the Morgans Hotel Group, founded by Ian Schrager, owner of the most famous clubs of the 70s, Studio 54. The hotel in question is the Mondrian located in Old Town Scottsdale, formerly known as the James Hotel.

Morgans Hotel Group, a company whose properties include hotels in New York, London, San Francisco and L.A., is currently in the process of transforming the 200-room Mondrian into an experience that blends nature, the outdoors and casual living. In order to achieve this goal, the company has opted to use several different designers. Philippe Starck had been their long term designer. When the company went public, that changed. "Now they are hiring many different designers to renovate all of the hotels for the brand," says Noriega-Ortiz.



Possessing two master's degrees in architecture from Columbia University and the University of Puerto Rico, Noriega-Ortiz launched his own firm in 1992. It wasn't long before his client list grew, and his reputation for colorful bold designs spread. More popularly known for his residential projects for high profile clients like author Laura Esquivel, media mogul Michael Fuchs and recording artist Lenny Kravitz, Noriega-Ortiz' portfolio also includes commercial projects. Pikayo, a restaurant at the Museum of Art in San Juan, Puerto Rico; showroom displays for the Kohler Company headquarters, Kohler, Wis., and the lobby and wine cellar of 30 Crosby Lofts, a loft condominium project in Manhattan and Scottsdale's Mondrian Hotel are included on the stellar list.

Designing a large scale project, naturally, presents challenges, and unexpected surprises. "Well, the heat for one," said a laughing Noriega-Ortiz when listing the first consideration in designing in our climate. He also observed the activity of the Valley. "I come from New York where people go out all of the time. I never expected people from Scottsdale to be out all of the time," says the architect/designer. "I noticed, just as an outsider, people seem to be more party oriented."

Taking full advantage of that, the hotel is designed with the idea of being a place for social interaction and exploration. "I think having that social connection, and designing a hotel in which we are supposed to have fun, it is taking that into consideration. From the minute you arrive on the property, there is going to be something that leads you to the restaurant, the bar, the lobby itself; it is going to be a place to see and be seen."

Not only is it a place to be seen, it is a showcase for individual style. "We are creating an atmosphere for people to look pretty against," says Noriega-Ortiz adding, "So we are going to be sort of monochromatic, so we don't have too many, or too much, color so that people can stand out and people can look really wonderful."

If you are thinking this means subdued tones or rooms lacking in brilliant colors, the opposite is true. Taking inspiration from our environment, vibrant color is a primary ingredient in the over all design. "Whenever we use color in the hotel, we use it in abundance. There is a room that is red, that is black, pink, the rooms have color, and it is all over the room," says Noriega-Ortiz. "In the desert you see expanses of color."

Slated to open December of this year, plans are being set for a huge party to kick off the newly redesigned hotel. With work still in progress, the designer visits the Valley every two weeks. But will he be here to see his color rich vision completed? "I hope," says the optimistic designer architect. ■