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Colorado cool: Robert Singer illuminates Aspen nightspots

Jun 1, 1999 12:00 PM, Joy Marie Lofton

The ski season in Aspen might be cold, but vacationers can escape to any number of hotspots after a day on the slopes. Lighting designer Robert H. Singer, IALD, IES, has been setting this winter wonderland on fire with his know-how, creating award-winning designs for the chic restaurants Baang, Pacifica, and Matsuhisa. Matsuhisa is a Japanese restaurant, where Singer creates layers of light within the multileveled space. And while Baang's ambiance blends the flavors of Asia and France, Pacifica attempts to bring the ocean to the Rockies with its seafood menu and cobalt-blue lighting motif.

Singer has been in the business for over 20 years. He started his career in New York City after studying theatrical lighting design with Lester Polokov for three years prior to working with Lightlab. "They were cutting-edge at the time, designing huge venues all over the world," Singer says. In the late 70s and early 80s, he worked on legendary clubs like Studio 54 and the Tunnel, which was his first project after forming his own company, Robert Singer & Associates Inc. On his own, he also worked on Laura Belle and Cafe Iguana in New York before expanding his reach, establishing offices in both New York and Aspen, where he continued his club connection lighting

426 (see "Rocky Mountain high," page 32). His latest restaurant projects have taken him on a world tour of cuisine.

A sibling to New York's Nobu and the Matsuhisa in Los Angeles, Matsuhisa in Aspen is the latest opening for successful owners Jeff Klein and Nobuko Kang. Singer's challenge was to meet the client's needs within a revised budget. Originally, the budget was set at \$20 per square foot for equipment, but as general construction costs increased, the lighting dollar allotment decreased. The new budget was less than half the original, forcing Singer and his crew to be creative with their use of resources. Through incandescent, decorative, accent, and indirect light sources, Singer made the space timeless and natural, artfully combining wallwashers and hidden niche lighting.

The main entry's hand-hammered signage is backlit using a color-corrected fluorescent, with a ballast for 0 degrees F use. Singer chose this fixture for its lifespan and low maintenance. After entering the multilevel restaurant, patrons cannot ignore the concrete elevator shaft, which is illuminated in a kinetic Nile blue wash from two Wavelight projectors from Precision Projection Systems. The constantly moving projections create a soothing atmosphere with their halogen water ripples.

The upper-level elevator lobby has low-voltage linear indirect cove uplight and shoji-like, decorative paper wall sconces and pendants. Inside the elevator, a red glow is created through a filtered fluorescent source hidden behind the shoji drop ceiling.

In the main dining room, lanterns, backlit shoji, table lamps, accent, and niche lighting create warm layers of illumination. Customized table lamps are mounted to banquette partitions. A private dining room is lit with an indirect incandescent linear strip wall wash. The same indirect source lights the ceiling as it slopes. Singer augmented these indirect sources with recessed directional VN5P MR-16s with soft-focus lenses. Black alzak trims control the glare on the tabletops and sushi counter.

Shoji pendants throw pools of light onto the handmade wooden trunk bar surface. The sake bar's display is lit with low-voltage track heads, which are concealed within a ceiling slot. A recessed directional NFL MR-16 with a soft-focus lens offers task lighting for bartenders.

At the sushi bar, a bamboo canopy is backlit with concealed floating track lights with MR-16 floods and amber dichroic filters. A slot hides two-circuit track and accent lighting for presentation on the sushi bar and task lighting for the chefs. To tie together the levels and lights, an inexpensive control system was specified to give the client four overall scenes.

Also following in the footsteps of an East Coast original, an Aspen outpost of Baang welcomes hungry skiers with an Asian and French fusion cuisine. The first such restaurant is in Greenwich, CT, and the client requested that the Rocky Mountain location feel warm and rustic, but still cutting-edge and sophisticated, like the original. The design team achieved this by enhancing rich colors within the restaurant's interiors, and complementing the architecture of the 3,500-sq. ft. (315 sq. m) freestanding structure. Its simple exterior features a revolving door, two copper-clad barn doors, and a backlit neon sign. A side dining patio sits beneath hanging votive lanterns, and is lined with arbor trees and an uplit bamboo wall backdrop.

Inside, glowing mica columns anchor the space, supporting aspen leaf-imprinted clouds that float, uplit with indirect low-voltage linear sources. While the bar is lit with custom mica pendants, Singer used adjustable MR-16s for the tables, with black alzak reflectors to cut down on glare. The back wall is evenly washed with incandescent wallwashers, and the silhouetted wall display is backlit with neon, at a color temperature of 3500K.

For the exposed kitchen, Singer hid recessed PAR-38 150W floods behind a valance. Patrons en route to the satay bar go up a stairwell that features hanging tiered period pendants, and pass picture niches lit with hidden linear low-voltage sources. Once in the satay bar, mica pendants illuminate the exclusive space.

As its name and design suggest, Pacifica's concept is the ocean. The idea was for this seafood restaurant to bring the ocean and its sunshine to the Rockies. Owners asked that the exterior and center of the interior emit a soft blue glow as an oceanic simulation. To do this, Singer used a maritime exterior wall sconce with cobalt-blue filters, and cobalt-blue pendants above the bar counter.

The pendants were chosen for form and function. The champagne-glass-shaped blue shades create the central ocean glow, and the opal white glass interiors of these pendants throw white pools of light onto the marble counter top. The LD added a sunshine contrast to the cobalt blue with amber perimeter wall sconces. Also in contrast to the cool blue lights, he added tabletop candles and warm accent lights on the floral arrangements in the window bays, which give this 2,500-sq.-ft. (225 sq. m) restaurant a romantic ambiance. Aspen-by-the-sea: another mood brought to light by Singer's apt designs.

Joy Marie Lofton writes on entertainment design from Los Angeles.

Matsuhisa

Owners Jeff Klein, Nobuko Kang

Lighting and custom lighting equipment designer Robert Singer & Associates Inc.

Interior designers Jeff Klein, Nobuko Kang, Robert Singer, Briston Peterson, Larry Bogdanow

Space planner Larry Bogdanow

Architect of record Ted Guy

Electrical supply Valley Electric, Bill Steele II

Contractor Brikor, Briston Peterson

Electrical contractor Aspen Electric

Equipment manufacturers Flos, GE, Juno, Lightolier, Precision Projection Systems, Resolute, Rosco, Teka

Baang

Owner Signature Entertainment

Lighting and column designer Robert Singer & Associates Inc.

Interior concept Jody Panette

Interior designer David Rockwell

Electrical supply Valley Electric, Bill Steele II

Contractor John Olson

Electrical contractor Carter Electric

Equipment manufacturers Ardee, Cotle, GE, Juno, Lutron, Tar Heel Mica

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Owner EC/MT LLC

Lighting designer Robert Singer & Associates Inc.

Interior designer Jeffrey Bernett

Electrical supply Valley Electric, Bill Steele II

Contractor Eric Casper and Aspen Design Works

Electrical contractor Carter Electric

Special effects, theatrical lighting, and programming Cybertech Designs, Steve Lieberman and Kim Monaco

Equipment manufacturers Ardee, Celestial, Creative, GE, Halo Iris, High End Systems, Litetouch, NSI Colortran, Rosco, SLD

Pacifica

Owner Signature Entertainment

Lighting designer Robert Singer & Associates Inc.

Interior concept/design Jody Panette

Electrical supply Valley Electric, Bill Steele II

Contractor Aspen Design Works

Electrical contractor Aspen Electric

Equipment manufacturers Canlet, Flos, Juno, Lighting Collaborative, Lightolier, Rosco

Robert Singer didn't stop after designing Aspen's newest dinner dens. He then teamed up with Cybertech Designs on the town's exclusive club, 426. Singer hired LD Stephen Lieberman to handle the special effects and programming of the private club. Together, they created an understated and chic New York-style club/lounge atmosphere. The clientele is of superstar status: Its members are the big-spender vacationers in Aspen. "This club is not trying to bang everyone's head with heavy house music," Lieberman says.

Singer achieved space, height, and drama through light in this 3,500-sq.-ft. (315 sq. m) basement space. Patrons enter the private lounge and dance club down a set of stairs and into a long corridor. This corridor runs the length of the entire club, giving way to lounge areas and ending with a dance floor at the far end. Singer aided the interior designer with the ceiling plans and profiles by suggesting a barrel vault ceiling with indirect cove uplights and VN5P MR-16

downlights. This not only provides maximum ceiling height, but also encourages a traffic pattern within the club. He then specified Ardee Klikstrip along the ceiling to give a floating illusion in the corridor.

It might look dark, but light plays a huge part in creating the underground atmosphere. Singer managed to make the dark nooks and crannies practical by lighting the bar counter with VNSP MR-16 downlights, and the back bar bottles are uplit with 100% dimmable SPX fluorescents, allowing both patrons and bartenders to see what's going on. Linear incandescent uplight shines on the curtains behind the champagne banquettes, and the tabletops are lit with VNSP MR-16 downlights. Art niches also glow with accent downlights.

A view from the bar shows a glimpse of the dance floor lit with a subtle four-color wash and patterns, and more color from intelligent lights. Lieberman installed four High End Systems Technobeams(R) and 24 Times Square SB-200s. The four DDS 5600 dimmer packs from NSI Colortran are controlled by the company's MC-7008 dimmer board. "It's definitely the most upscale place we've installed," Lieberman says, "but when Singer incorporates his design into the space, it always looks expensive."

Time was the challenge for Lieberman, who flew to Aspen with Kim Monaco and Barry Scott to install the lights and sound. "We were behind schedule, and ended up installing and programming it in a crunch at the end," he says.

Singer's class and style are met with his creativity. He installed a unique one-way mirror between lounge areas that allows the VIPs to see what's going on in the other room without being seen. To do this, he made the lighting in the seating room brighter than the light in the viewing room. In the seating lounge areas he uplit the ceiling perimeters with indirect coves to create a floating ceiling plan. Singer augmented the lighting in these areas with adjustable accent downlighting, which makes for a dramatic theatrical effect for the Aspen elite.

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