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Fine by design

As one of the world's most renowned hotel and spa architects and designers, Clint Nagata knows what makes these indulgent spaces work. Now bringing his unique skills to our region by opening a BLINK Design Group office in Dubai, GMT GCC asks what makes him, and his designs, tick.





As the mind behind two of the UAE's newest, chicest and most sought-after spas — Banyan Tree Dubai and W Dubai — Mina Seyahi — Clint Nagata knows a thing or two about chilling out. Born and raised on the Hawaiian island of Oahu and educated at the University of Hawaii, perhaps the state's island culture informed his penchant for relaxed style. Or perhaps it's his Japanese-American background or his time in Thailand, where he originally opened BLINK Design Studio, that contributes to his meditative, Asian-inspired designs. Whatever's behind it, one thing's for certain — everything that Clint touches seems to turn to spa and hospitality gold, and now with BLINK's permanent presence in the Middle East, following the opening of studios in Shanghai and Singapore, we're expecting to see ever more of his architectural vision here in our region.

GMT GCC caught up with the multiple-award-winning architect — who most recently picked up two gongs and two further nominations for his Six Senses Kyoto project — to talk all things wellness, relaxation and regional inspiration.

Clint Nagata brings together a wealth of cultural influences to inform his chic and comforting designs.



Above: Banyan Tree Spa Dubai benefits from a gentle, natural colour palette for a calming effect.

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Wellness-focused properties cater to the rising demand for health-conscious travel, offering holistic wellbeing that resonates with guests seeking more than just a vacation.
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Clint — some may call you ‘the spa whisperer’ as you seem to have the ultimate knack for creating these peaceful, harmonious spaces. What initially drew you to spa design?

Spa design is an extension of the work we do with hospitality design, and we apply the same principles in hospitality design to the spa. Top luxury brands understand the importance of spas for today's travellers: whether it's for business or leisure, travel and a fast-paced lifestyle can make physical demands on our bodies. As a frequent traveller myself, I understand the need for a space of solace for rejuvenation. It has become a personal challenge for me to embark on spa design and I enjoy doing something that would resonate with hotel guests as well. I'm not one for trends, as they come and go. Instead, I've always aimed for timelessness, guided by principles of simplicity, balance and proportion. This philosophy has remained constant regardless of location. Over the years, we've refined our approach and designs to better align with clients' needs.

Where do you find your inspiration for creating spas that are havens of both tranquillity and wellness? Do you look beyond hospitality and into other forms

of architecture? Any particular styles, locations or time periods that you draw from?

My inspiration has always been based on my concept of place making. For example, our recent project, the Six Senses Kyoto, aligns well with our 'place making' philosophy, where we take a deep dive into local lore, culture, traditions and arts. This brought us into the Heian era [794 to 1185 CE]; where the concept of *miyabi*, based on refined sensibilities and poetic subtlety, played a huge part in the Japanese arts. *Miyabi* expresses appreciation for the gestures and rituals that mark the passage of an ordinary day such as the interplay of light and shadow, the changing colours and moods of the seasons.

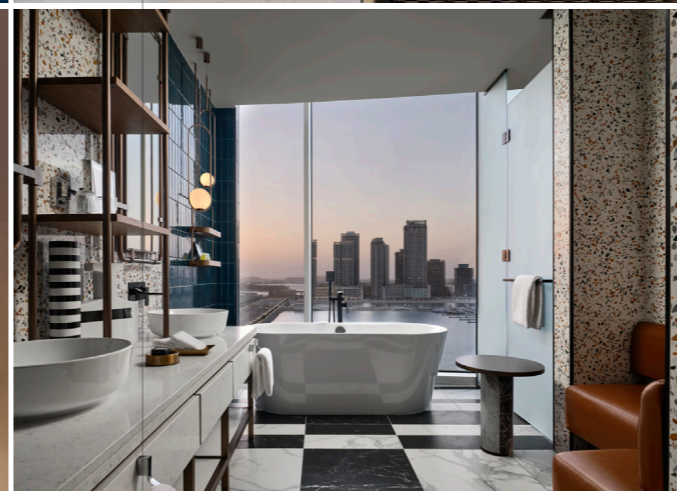
When you take on a project, what aspects of the location or culture do you find important to take into consideration?

Our approach is to be as authentic as possible, by designing authentic spaces that enhance treatments using thoughtful colour palettes, materials and techniques rooted in local traditions, along with innovative finishes and micro-textures of nature. Our integration of lighting, colours and ▶▶



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Clockwise from top left: Huvaafen Fushi Maldives;
Banyan Tree Dongguan Songshan Lake; W Mina
Seyahi suite and bathroom; Banyan Tree Spa
Dubai rain mist experience and plunge pool.



technology further strengthens the connection to nature, making the space a destination in itself.

Our work at the Regent Phu Quoc in Vietnam is a tribute to the heritage of the location by creating a luxury resort experience imbued with the soul and culture of Phu Quoc on the island’s most beautiful and longest beach. Typical Vietnamese architectural elements such as water gardens, courtyards and tropical landscaping have been reinterpreted into a simple yet elegant modern design that reflects the spirit of the place through its materiality. Other design features found throughout the resort such as the cast metal screens and the bovi brackets [wooden truss system] have been reinterpreted into a modern aesthetic on screens, carpets and accessories. Another significant touch is the shaded pool inspired by the sails of Vietnamese ships of the past.

Following on from this, when creating your Dubai projects, what did you do differently from spas in Japan, China or the Maldives? How much did you need to learn about Middle Eastern and Gulf culture

before you felt prepared to tackle them?

Our team members are described as ‘explorers’. Our designs are inspired by our travels, the people we meet, the cultures and landscapes we immerse in. We challenge ourselves with new ideas to take us beyond the expected, and unearth the unique. This is all part of our concept of place making where we take a deep dive into each locale.

Every journey we take is different, influenced by experiences shared with each client. No two designs are exactly the same as we respect the culture, traditions and heritage of each location. We aim to create spaces that are meaningful, respectful and memorable.

Now BLINK has a Dubai office — what led to your decision to put a make a permanent base here in the region? When did it open and how are things going so far?

Our office opened a year ago and the response has been positive. We are committed to building successful relationships with key clients and felt that we needed a stronger on the ground presence to foster this.

I like the BLINK concept of ‘designing for wellness beyond the spa’ — why is it important to shape the entire experience, especially when it comes to brands like Six Senses and Banyan Tree?

My focus has always been on the concept of wellbeing rather than wellness, as it encompasses a more holistic perspective, looking at how design influences the people who interact with it. The pandemic has underscored the significance of designing spaces that foster comfort and offer personal choice. Brands like Six Senses and Banyan Tree have their distinct guidelines and values for wellness and spa design, and we must thoughtfully integrate these to craft meaningful and memorable experiences for their guests.

Wellness is an increasingly important part of the hospitality industry — what can this dimension do that other more traditional aspects of hoteliery can’t?

Wellness has become a key differentiator in the hospitality sector because it offers a deeply personalised

experience that traditional aspects of hoteliery often overlook. While traditional hospitality focuses on comfort, luxury and service, wellness goes further by addressing the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of guests. It offers guests transformative experiences — such as spa treatments, mindfulness activities and nutrition plans — that allow them to leave feeling rejuvenated and restored.

Wellness-focused properties cater to the rising demand for health-conscious travel, offering holistic wellbeing that resonates with guests seeking more than just a vacation. This aspect of hospitality helps brands build lasting loyalty by delivering more than comfort or aesthetics

Does BLINK have any other Middle Eastern projects in the pipeline? Any hints you can give us for new locations to look forward to?

We have been quite active and are fortunate to have a considerable pipeline including projects in Diriyah Gate, Ras Al Kaimah, Riyadh, Jeddah, Medina, Oman and Dubai. 