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DIAD TO WORK THE MAGIC AT THE BOLINGO

Reinventing or redesigning an existing icon is never a small feat, and even less so when it is in a different country, such as Nigeria. But that said this is the undertaking that Legacy Hotels and Resorts has decided to embark on with the revamp and refurbishment of the iconic Bolingo Hotel in Abuja, Nigeria.

Abuja is now formally the capital city of Nigeria and is located in the centre of this behemoth West African country. Not the traditional or historic capital, Abuja was only declared the capital in late 1991, after being purpose-built as a "planned city", and because of its neutral position between previously rival cultures in the area.

The most iconic geography defining the region is Aso Rock, a 400m monolith that eerily stands above its surrounds and was formed as a result of water erosion. Less monolithic, but by no means less iconic to the area, is the Bolingo Hotel which for the last couple of decades has been a firm accommodation favourite amongst locals and tourists to the area.

When first identifying the Bolingo as a new investment into the area, Legacy knew the hotel would need a top to toe refurbishment, including an entire new brush stroke to the interior design palette currently in place at the hotel. It is with this that it turned to long-time interior design partners and specialists, DIAD, Darley Interior Architectural Design, to help with the task.

With extensive experience in designing the interiors of five and six star luxury hotels, spas and luxury residential properties, as well as having worked on the interiors of the Michelangelo Hotel, Shiree Darley and her team are no strangers to a challenge. So when approached by Legacy to work with the company on the refurbishment and interior design of Abuja's Bolingo Hotel, the company couldn't wait to apply its expertise.

According to Amanda Elliott at DIAD, when approached by the Legacy team, the brief was clear – bring an entirely new look and feel to all areas of the hotel, including the design of all spaces, add an element of the local cultural dynamics and create something entirely new.

"When we received the initial plan we were at first shocked by how dark and small the spaces we had to work with were," states Amanda. "It was our job to not only lift these, but create an entire new signature design for the Bolingo that would position it as a five star luxury destination."

But the task of designing the initial concept of what the hotel, when complete, would eventually look like was more daunting than it looked. Working with architect Francois Pienaar, the DIAD team have decided to draw their inspiration from the region. This includes the colours, sights, sounds, cultural diversity, local artwork, fabrics and people of Abuja and Nigeria itself.

Their portion of the project entails working on the interior of all of the public spaces, including the reception areas, restaurants, bars and the like as well as all of the rooms. But in order to transform the Bolingo from its almost 70s styled architecture, to be able to fit in with the design excellence required by the Legacy Group, much of the hotel will need to be gutted and entirely redone.

"The project is extensive and the whole concept of the hotel will be designed around a piazza styled notion, where guests will have access to a retail centre, conference rooms, a vibey hub of eating and entertainment areas, all while being able to quickly nip off to their rooms when they need to," states Shiree. "We are currently also laying the plans for the new conference area as well as a spa, all of which link into the entire lifestyle hotel living concept that Legacy is currently working into all of its properties."

"When we design interiors, we don't just throw fabrics down to try and create a style, we like to give each one of our designs a sense of place. It is with this that Amanda has been hard at work researching Abuja as a city and looking at what makes it unique and what its sense of place is, with the intention of weaving this into the areas and spaces we create," adds Shiree.

According to Amanda the research component of the project has been incredibly rewarding, yielding little known facts about the area, which they have been able to couple into their own thinking for what the Bolingo should look

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"Abuja is such a colourful city, the people are very fashion driven and the fashion itself is very Avant Garde. The city is also home to a host of beautiful West African models and the city is really abuzz with traditional folklore as well as contemporary influences and modern businesses. We have managed to lay all of this onto our canvas and will bring this into all of the finishes at the hotel," says Amanda.

It is with this that the initial plans for the Bolingo include clean lines, open and contemporary rooms, bathrooms that have been integrated into the actual living areas of the rooms, that are also larger than anticipated. The floors where the rooms are will also be completely gutted, in order to open up the rooms and new windows will be installed to ensure more light is let into, what the team terms a "light starved" environment.

"We have brought in elements of the much loved indigo colours used in the region as well as carved timber and silk painted batik," continues Amanda. "One of the challenges we face is producing the elements we need in Abuja, but have managed to overcome that by ensuring the designs are modular and that each one can be manufactured wherever they need to be and then brought in."

According to Shiree one of the unique features they are bringing to the Bolingo is combining architecture and design. She says this can be evidenced in the headboards in the bedrooms that are more architectural by design, and stand as an art piece.

In addition, the project entails taking a four star product and bringing in the luxury and plush feeling of a five star hotel, that will be suited to the eclectic mix of both business and tourist clientele that frequent the area.

"Abuja is starved of luxury places where people can go to and really feel like they have been somewhere special," adds Shiree. "We want to give the Bolingo that something special, that puts it ahead of its competitors and really defines the future standard of hotels to the area. The people here are still exposed to the cookie cutter notion of hotel accommodation, where every room looks the same, no matter where you are in the world."

Amanda says that the team isn't just achieving this through the look of the property but by also working with the architect to make the windows higher and change the current proportion of concrete to glass, to have more glass will improve the natural lighting in the hotel. In the layout subtle changes are being made to furnishings to ensure that room entrances aren't cluttered.

In the common areas, including the bar and the reception, DIAD is hoping to bring a jazzy element with big open areas which all flow one from the other in a fluid motion. According to the DIAD team the whole idea is to ensure that the effect is dramatic and inspiring.

"This is a very brave design, it is all about glass, textures and architectural space as opposed to simply refabricating an interior through new textiles, furniture and carpets," says Shiree. "It integrates images of the area and surroundings as well as the people, creating that sense of place we are looking for. It involves thinking out of the box and being a pioneer in design, it takes the perception of what a hotel room should be and blows the lid off of it."

"It is so exciting to work in West Africa, the whole continent is opening up as a tourist and business venue and Legacy is riding this wave as it starts. It is always so great to work with the company as they won't settle for anything less than that which has a wow factor," concludes Shiree.

The Bolingo project is scheduled for completion in 2013. It will include about six floors of hotel rooms, around 94 apartments, conference facilities, two floors of parking, meeting rooms, a spa and a gym.

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