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A glass high-rise that fits in and stands out

MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Raffles Boston Back Bay Hotel & Residences to the left of the former John Hancock Tower (center) and the Clarendon (at right), as viewed from Columbus Avenue.

When developers approached architect Michael Liu to design what would eventually become the 35-story Raffles Boston Back Bay Hotel & Residences on Trinity Place in Boston, the pressure was immediately on. Not only was Raffles the tallest building the architect had ever worked on, but it was also located in a neighborhood full of historic brownstones and some of Boston's most recognizable modern towers. "The trick of it was to really make the building part of the landscape and also an entity that's striking on its own," said Liu, a senior partner and

With Raffles hotel a Boston architect faced the epic challenge of designing a tower in a neighborhood full of brownstones and iconic architecture



CHRISTOPHER MUTHER

design principal at The Architectural Team Inc. "[The John] Hancock Tower is an architectural icon. It was important to develop a design that would not blur the reading and the legibility of the Hancock in the skyline. I think we were pretty successful." Liu said his building has a glass skin, just as the Hancock does, so he focused on the shape and color of the structure to help distinguish the two. The 60-story Hancock is not only the tallest building in Boston, it's also the tallest in New England. The Henry N. Cobb-designed Hancock is a rectangular parallelogram. Liu approached Raffles by designing a 35-story fan-shaped tower, a necessity brought about by both the footprint of the lot and a way to help it stand out from its taller neighbor. **RAFFLES, Page N16**



A rendering of the fine-dining restaurant Amar, which chef George Mendes is opening in Raffles.



STONEHILL TAYLOR

A Michelin-starred chef will bring Portuguese cuisine to new heights

by Christopher Muther
GLOBE STAFF

He made a name for himself in New York with his Michelin-starred Portuguese restaurant Aldea but during a video chat last week chef George Mendes wasn't focused on Manhattan's competitive dining scene. He was reflecting on his Portuguese roots and connections to New England. "One of my earliest memories was a ferry ride from the Cape to Martha's Vineyard when I was 8 or 9 years old," said Mendes, whose par-



Seared shrimp with garlic, sweet smoked paprika, and roasted shrimp jus from Mendes's now-closed restaurant Aldea.

ents immigrated to the United States from Portugal in 1969. "There were Sunday afternoon trips to meet with church groups and connect with the Portuguese community in New Bedford and Fall River. There were barbecues with sardines and grilled chicken and Portuguese beer. Those are my childhood memories and connections I have with the community."

Mendes, who grew up in a tight-knit Portuguese enclave in Danbury Conn., is preparing to create a new set of memories in New England. He'll debut a restaurant at the posh **MENDES, Page N16**



JOE THOMAS

A look inside a guest room at Raffles in Back Bay.

An exclusive peek inside guest rooms at Boston's newest luxury hotel

by Christopher Muther
GLOBE STAFF
Understanding the luxury of the hotel rooms and condos at Raffles Boston Back Bay Hotel & Residences will simply be a matter of glancing at price tags. When it debuts this summer, the

\$400 million-plus Raffles will have the most expensive hotel rooms in Boston. Hotel developers Gary Saunders and Jordan Warshaw weren't keen to talk numbers, but after a fair amount of prodding, they offered up a few details. "Our rates will be the highest in the city because we believe we'll have **HO EL, Page N13**

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he presidential suite at Raffles Back Bay Hotel & Residences.

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A look inside one of the 147 guest rooms at Raffles

Inside Boston's new luxury hotel

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the most unique and special product in the city," Saunders said. Hotel rates vary wildly by season, but generally, ultra-luxury rooms in Boston run in the mid- to high-hundreds to just over \$1,000 per night.

"When you see them, I think you'll understand why," added Warshaw. "That's why we expect these to be at the upper end of what's being charged in Boston."

Raffles, a chain based in Singapore and owned by the French hotel group Accor, chose Boston to open its first North American property. The hotel, which began in Singapore in 1887, now has 17 locations. Boston will be its 18th. The 35-story hotel will have 147 guest rooms plus 146 residences. With its five restaurants and bars, Saunders said it will be like a mini city located inside the gleaming glass tower. If you prefer to take up residence here, pied-à-terres begin at \$1.1 million. Two bedrooms and larger start at \$3.9 million. Penthouses will set you back more than \$10 million. More than 75 percent of the condos have already been sold.

"But it's more than that," Warshaw said. "We've created a vertical neighborhood. It's a place that instantly makes you feel special."

To get a sense of what makes the hotel so special (otherwise known as expensive), we rang up the design team at Stonehill Taylor. The New York-based firm was responsible for the look of the interiors of the hotel (with the exception of the Long Bar). The company has also handled interior design for the TW Hotel, the Nomad in New York, and the Plaza Hotel in New York.

Paul Taylor, president of the firm, said incorporating Boston influences was front of mind in the creative process. He said they picked up on the local natural surroundings and translated them into the design.

"There's the Fredrick Law Olmsted-designed Emerald Necklace right there, along with all of the window boxes in Beacon Hill," Taylor said. "So we went toward a biophilic theme as one of the design pillars. Another aspect we incorporated was copper, a reference to Paul Revere's copper plating mill. The last of the design pillars we looked at was the Boston Public Library, specifically the colonnade." ("Biophilic" is a term that refers to incorporating nature-inspired elements into design.)

Taylor sounded most excited about the hotel's Sky Lobby. Guests enter the hotel on the street level, and take an express elevator to the lobby on the 17th floor. The Sky Lobby sports a



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three-story staircase that looks more like a massive sculpture than a means of going up a flight or two.

"I think of it as a town center," he said. "Even if you're not staying at Raffles, there's still a lot to do at the hotel. You've got fine dining, you have the Long Bar, a speakeasy. There's a panoramic terrace that's carved out of the building, so you can actu-



JOETHOM S

Hand-painted wall coverings decorate walls behind free-standing tubs at Raffles

ally sit outside, on the 17th floor."

The hotel's version of Boston's window boxes are the plants that will dramatically cascade into the Sky Lobby. But there are elements that reflect the outside throughout. A dramatic branch-like chandelier hangs in the hotel's fine-dining restaurant, Mar; it looks like a tree blossoming with light.

The 147 guest rooms, including the 30 suites, are designed to make the most of the views. Imagine the shape of each room as a slice of pie, with the most narrow part of the room serving as the entrance, and the wider area at the windows. Average

guest rooms are about 475 square feet each. The hotel suites vary in size, with the largest, called the Midnight Suite, offering a kitchen and a bathtub large enough for a small party. Most guest rooms have curved sofas with a dining/work table.

In the marble bathrooms, murals were printed behind free-standing tubs. Even though they were printed off-site, artists came to the hotel and painted embellishments on them, making each unique. The art was inspired by Harvard's Ware Collection of glass flowers and plants.

"Those are the typical guest rooms," said Bethany Gale, interior design director at Stonehill Taylor. "The 15 gallery suites have darker, more avant-garde approach to the design. The 14 garden suites really relate to the Emerald Necklace and the Greenway. It has a very botanical influence."

The hotel's presidential suite, which has a kitchen and a fireplace, references Paul Revere with copper accents. The nightly rate for the suite will likely start between \$10,000 to \$15,000 a night.

Gale is quick to point out that the local references, such as Revere and the Emerald Necklace, are used sparingly throughout the hotel.

"We wanted to be really careful about that," she said. "If you take things too literally, it can get very cheesy quickly. We wanted to be respectful, but not take a literal approach."

Beyond those influences, the

Left: A rendering of the three-story circular staircase

team at Stonehill Taylor also took a broader read of Boston's energy. Gale said she was looking to create spaces that had a timeless, classic feel, and that also tapped into the academic energy of the city. She said the firm was not looking to come to Boston and create a flashy New York-style hotel. Instead, the aesthetic for Boston was tailored. That's in addition to creating a hotel that feels both luxurious and timeless.

"You can't just throw money at something and make it luxurious," Taylor said. "We're also not trying to chase the next big design trend with this property. You want a place to have staying power, and I think we've done that with this project. I'm hoping timeless luxury is what people see and feel when they're here."

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he Long Bar has an outdoor terrace with views of the city.

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A glass high-rise that fits in and stands out

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Liu was also designing near another well-regarded building, the Clarendon, a 32-story brick building by Robert A.M. Stern, which sits catty-corner to the Hancock.

The process began 2 years ago when hotelier Gary Saunders and developer Jordan Warshaw approached Liu to develop a hotel at the site of the former Boston Common Hotel and Conference Center at 40 Trinity Place in the Back Bay. The hotel had 64 modest, two-star rooms that Warshaw and Saunders initially intended to refurbish but encountered difficulties making the building compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. So they turned to Liu to create the Back Bay's first high-rise since the Four Seasons opened its One Dalton location in 2008.

According to Liu, the shape of the Raffles tower allows unique views from every part of the building, adding, "There's a kind of theater to it."

"The view is never the same as you move through either the common spaces or different rooms," he said. "Moving through the common spaces in the hotel is not a static experience. It's choreographed."

The theater and choreography begin when hotel guests and residents walk into the relatively modest first floor of the building. From there, an elevator takes them to the 7th floor, known as the Sky Lobby. It has tall ceilings and panoramic views.



"If you look at the plan, you come from the street into the first floor," he said. "It's not a small lobby, but it's not a huge lobby. You get into an express elevator to the 7th floor. The doors open up, and you have an explosion of space. There's a circular three-floor staircase that sits like a giant sculpture. It's one

Top: The Raffles Boston Back Bay Hotel & Residences (in center) framed by 200 Clarendon, the former John Hancock Tower, on the left, and the Fairmont Copley Plaza Hotel on right. Above: The hotel (left) is reflected in the windows of 200 Clarendon (right).

surprise that leads you to another."

The Sky Lobby is the first of its kind in Boston.

It wasn't just the aesthetics that presented challenges. Liu compared building Raffles to a Swiss watch, with delicate, intricate details filling a limited amount of land. That meant figuring

out how to assemble the pre-fabricated, dramatic stairway on the 7th floor. Another challenge was bringing individual sections of the fourth-floor pool into the hotel and then welding them together.

One of the biggest of those challenges came with accommodating its neighbor, the University Club. The building received air rights from the club to build over it. That means Raffles is cantilevered over the club, rising 28 stories over it. The University Club and the former Boston Common Hotel and Conference Center shared a wall, which meant carefully creating a new wall for the club to build the hotel.

When Raffles signed on as the hotel operator, planning was well underway. Raffles, based in Singapore, is a luxury brand on par with the Four Seasons and has an 800-page brand-standard manual. But Liu said the most nerve-racking part of the project was when he had to choose \$4 million worth of glass for the windows.

"You choose a product years before it's installed on the building," he said. "You're looking at a mock-up, which is maybe eight feet tall and 6 feet wide. You just don't know until there's enough of it on the actual building to determine if it works. When it was up on the building and I knew the glass worked was when I thought, 'OK, I can breathe now!'"

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Portuguese cuisine reaches new heights

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new Raffles Boston Back Bay Hotel & Residences this summer. Called Amar, the fine-dining restaurant will focus on Portuguese cuisine "through a modern lens."

"It's going to be located on the 7th floor overlooking Copley Square with wonderful sweeping views of the city," he said. "It really sets the stage to put forth what I like to call a very humble cuisine. I give it a modern interpretation, but my goal is really to stay true to the authenticity of the recipes and then build on them. And that's really what my vision was at Aldea. It really feels like Amar is going to be a continuation of that path for me."

Mendes opened Aldea in the Flatiron/Union Square neighborhood of New York in 2009. Shortly after it opened, a New York Times reviewer described the chef's cuisine as "ambidextrous."

"One minute you're nibbling on crisp pig's ears," wrote Frank Bruni of the restaurant. "The next you're carefully maneuvering your spoon under a translucent, quivering orb of concentrated

mushroom broth — one of those liquid ravioli that the Spanish alchemist Ferran Adrià made famous — in an avant-garde consommé."

Beginning in 2008, Mendes was awarded a Michelin star every year Aldea was open. In addition to updating family recipes, he started tinkering with cuisine from Portuguese-colonized countries, such as Brazil. He shuttered the restaurant in February 2020 to "take a break, recharge creatively, and re-focus." After a brief stint at Veranda, a restaurant located in a SoHo hotel, he's headed to Boston.

"I have a family now," he said. "My wife and I have a 2-year-old and another one on the way. As much as we love New York, we were itching to move somewhere new. And then this opportunity presented itself."

He's currently house hunting in Boston as he works on the menu for Amar (the name of the restaurant means "love" in Portuguese). He was tight-lipped about the specifics of the menu. He said he'll strive for Amar to be a Michelin-starred venue but doesn't want it to simply be a fancy hotel restaurant or a restaurant for special occasions. He's



aiming to create a special occasion and everyday restaurant rolled into one tidy package. A spokesperson for the restaurant said prices for entrees and appetizers will be set when the menu has been completed.

"I can tell you that it's going to be heavily seafood-focused and vegetable-focused," he said. "I really want to amplify and showcase the bounty of what Boston's waters have to offer," he said. "That's really going to be the starting point. But I don't like to create a menu until I'm in the kitchen, and we don't

have access to the kitchen at the restaurant yet. But it's a modern Portuguese menu."

While there will be similarities between Aldea and Amar, Mendes said he's not looking to re-create the restaurant. His signature dish at Aldea was duck rice (arroz de pato). He said some version of the dish may appear on the menu at Amar because rice is integral to Portuguese cuisine.

The one dish Mendes guaranteed will be on the menu is his coveted egg tarts. The sweet custard egg tarts will

Egg tarts from chef George Mendes. He'll be serving them at Amar, his new restaurant in Boston, and at a first-floor cafe at the new Raffles hotel.

also be available at a first-floor cafe at Raffles, where pastries will be baked on-site.

Raffles will have a total of five restaurant and bar options: Amar on the 7th floor, a first-floor patisserie, a more casual neighborhood restaurant located on the first and second floor, a speakeasy on the 8th floor, and the hotel's chain-wide Long Bar will be on the 7th floor. The Singapore Sling originated at Raffles's Singapore location. Mendes will also be overseeing a lighter, New England-focused menu at the Long Bar.

Mendes has already begun reaching out to local farmers and fishermen, getting back in touch with his New England roots in the process.

"I'm excited and I'm nervous at the same time thinking about the process," he said. "Nervousness is healthy. But I'm excited because this is an opportunity to offer a little bit of my heritage and my passion. . . . That's really the driving thing for me."

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