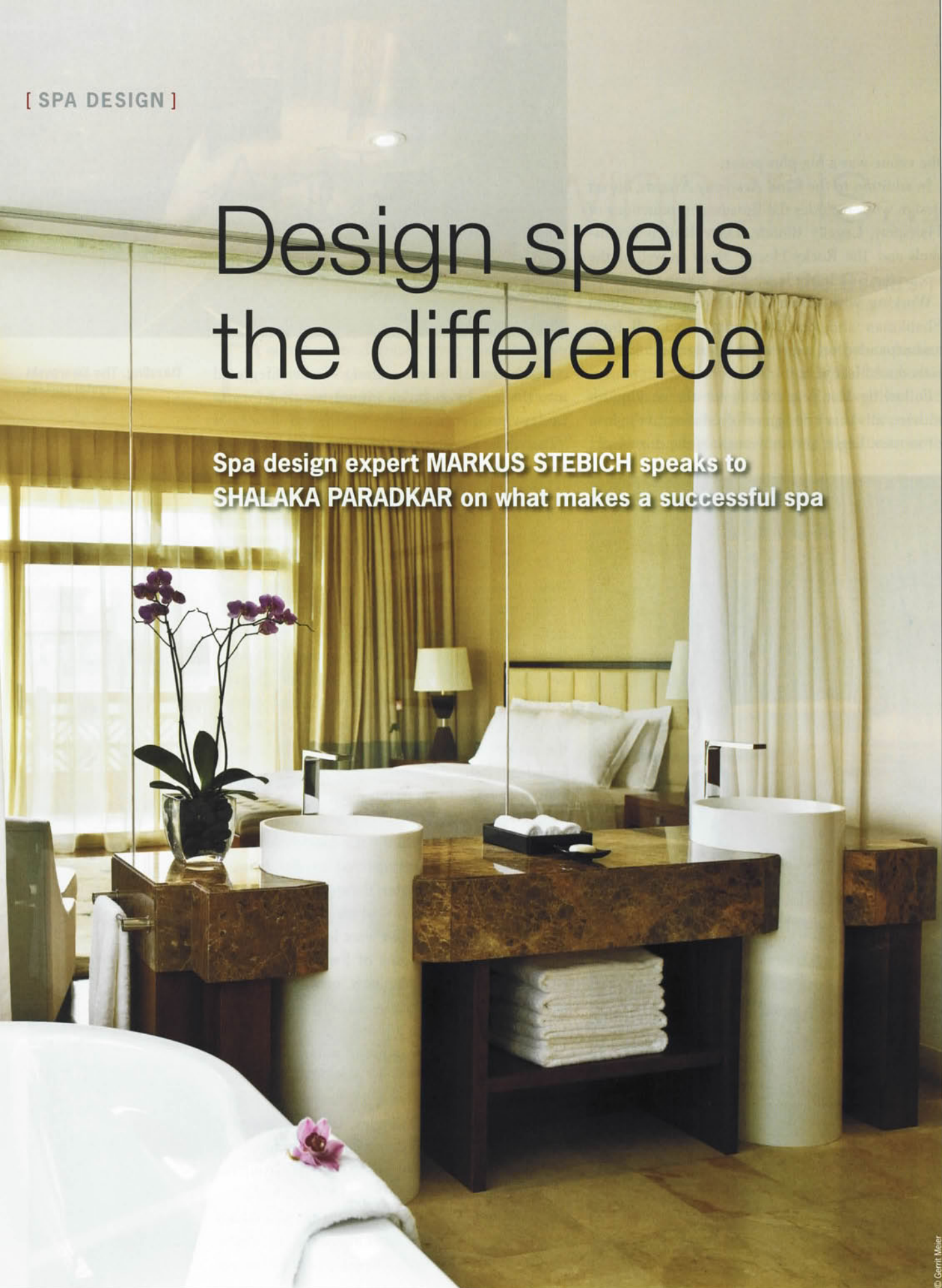


Design spells the difference

Spa design expert **MARKUS STEBICH** speaks to **SHALAKA PARADKAR** on what makes a successful spa



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Spas today are much more than a nice extra for a hotel – they are part of a powerful value offering, often a destination in their own right and a revenue booster for hotels in tough economic times. The uptick of interest in health and wellness also gave birth to a corresponding increase in the popularity of spas. According to the organisers of The Hotel Show, which takes place in Dubai, UAE next month, last year the spa industry in the Middle East and North Africa generated more than \$630 million annually from over 824 facilities, 60 per cent of which are in or around hotels.

But adding a spa to the programme is not just about mood lighting and exotic treatments. Design will spell the critical difference when it comes to

attracting and retaining patrons. From the small details, like the towels and toiletries, to the overall ambience, lighting, materials, temperature control and brand expressions, it is design which can make or mar the spa experience.

“The spa is no longer one specific space,” says Markus Stebich, managing director, Stebich Hospitality Solutions, based in the UAE and Germany. “It is permeating into guest room concepts and designs and into the lifestyles of the guests, even when they are not at the hotel. Many operators are expanding their hotel experience to include the time before a guest’s arrival and to the time after they have left, helping the guests take the



Oasis of calm:
The executive suite (facing page), couple's suite (below left) and tranquility pool at the Jaula Spa (below)





Welcome space: The reception space at the Jaula Spa

experience with them in more than just memory.”

Stebich, an architect by training, has previously worked as director of development, spas and interiors for Talise Spas and Jumeirah Hotels. He has been involved in developing nearly 30 spas – ranging from 300 sq m boutique spas to entire spa resorts, as well as helping to develop the Talise Spa brand in terms of design.

He is currently working on projects in Lebanon (Beirut), Saudi Arabia, the UAE (Dubai), Germany and the Caribbean as well as furniture design and graphic design.

So how much of a role does interior design really play in the success of a spa?

The success of a spa is dependent on three major elements: the spa concept, the interior design and the operator, and in that order.

These elements are interlinked: weakness in one will affect the others and will reduce the potential for the success of a spa, and none of the three elements are enough to create success on their own.

A successful spa has a strong idea and identity or character. Ideally, all three elements are an expression of the overall idea.

A good interior design is based on a clear concept. The same can be said of the operations. Therefore, the lead comes from the spa concept. The interior design should be an expression of the concept; the operator implements it and brings it all to life.

How have programming and space planning evolved over the years in spas in the Middle East?

What are current trends today?

It is difficult to discuss programming and space planning without discussing the spa concepts which give the direction. There are two types of spas: the larger, “international” spas and the smaller boutique or specialist spas.

The first group tend to be imported spa concepts catering to an international and more high-end clientele. The second group is generally oriented more towards the local market and tends to have more of an orientation towards beauty rather than wellness.

I don’t think programming and space planning have changed dramatically for either group over the years. Instead, the tendency is and has been to develop or introduce new concepts. The major difference today is that many more of the new concepts are “home grown” from the region or they incorporate more of the regional traditions and styles.

There is also more of a trend towards medical wellness. These are the components that are currently bringing the greatest changes to the programming and space planning. At the same time there seems to be greater diversity in the types of concepts being offered in the market. Sometimes it seems that new concepts are developed just to be “new”.

Personally I believe that concepts and designs that take a holistic approach, that is, those that consider not only the aesthetics but also the physical, mental, spiritual and energetic well-being of the guests will have staying power. A lot of spa operators are already taking this approach and therefore it is materialising in the designs as well.

Tell us about some of the spas you have worked on, and some of the unique design elements associated with these.

While at HBA, one of the projects I worked on was the Jaula Spa at the Grand Hyatt West Bay, Doha which opened last year.

We created a small village, set in a garden and with tranquility pools, all indoors. In the spa suites we used smooth, rounded gravel on parts of the floor to stimulate the feet. We wanted the materials to contribute to the sensory experience. And we worked closely with the lighting designer and the acoustical engineer to make sure the calming atmosphere was a total experience.

At Jumeirah, I worked closely with Anni Hood

who developed the Talise Spa concept. This was a very comprehensive and holistic spa concept. My role was to communicate the concept to designers and help interpret the spa concept in design terms – this was incredibly fascinating.

In essence, we were responsible for communicating the personality of the spa concept in a way that allowed the designers to apply their creative talents to paint a portrait of the spa through their interior designs. The goal was to achieve a result where a design was at once a true expression of the personality of the spa and equally an expression of the designers' interpretation of that personality.

As a designer, there is hardly another position that offers you a chance to get such a deep and intimate understanding of spa and design.

For the Talise Spa there is a great emphasis on the inherent energies of materials, locations and spaces. This emphasis opened new avenues and approaches to interpreting concepts through design. In that sense the spa concept and its interpretation became unique design elements.

I have always believed in the importance or even necessity of a holistic approach to design. Let the project, its requirements, its personality, its story unfold and guide you.

When the project shows its true character, it becomes timeless. Projects where a personality is imposed do not become timeless.

One of the projects we are currently working on is the renovation of a hotel built in the 1950's. The architecture is a beautiful example of modern architecture from that time and the location is stunning. It is not a large hotel but it will have a small spa. We are taking our cues for the design from the architecture, the location and the hotel's position as a city resort. The unique design elements are developing from being true to the personality of the hotel and its history.

How are hotels using spas to boost revenues in the current economic climate?

That which is desirable adds value. Fulfill a need, whether existing or newly created, and you gain guests. Many hotel operators have recognised that this is what spas do. To boost revenues, hotels are communicating their objects and services of desire and they are integrating them more into the overall operations and guest experience.

Specialist offers wealth of experience



Pammukale Turkish delight: Stebich's design for a thermal spa in Pammukkale

Before setting up Stebich Hospitality Solutions, Markus was director of development, spa and interiors, Jumeirah Group, after having been managing associate of Hirsch Bedner Associates Dubai.

He is a registered architect and interior designer.

Markus' experience ranges from architectural master planning to interior design detailing and includes project management and construction administration in both architectural and interior design projects. His project experience includes commercial buildings, hospitals and clinics, luxury residential villas, shopping malls and furniture design. He has specialised in hotel design for more than a decade and has worked on close to 100 hotel projects world wide as an architect, interior designer and in his role with Jumeirah.

As an architect he worked in the US and in Germany. In his 10 years with the German firm RKW he was involved in many projects, including working on the ARAG tower in Düsseldorf, a collaboration between RKW and Norman Foster.

Markus also has a long relationship with the art world, through his family, his personal interests and as an artist. Early in his career he worked with the artist Robert Rauschenberg.

He is active as a speaker at conferences on design, as a member of the advisory council of the interior design department of the American University Dubai, as a member of the executive committee of Association of Professional Interior Designers and as a regular member of international design juries.

In 2009 he set up SHS Stebich Hospitality Solutions offering comprehensive design and development services for the hospitality industry as well as bringing the hospitality understanding and approach to other types of projects.

