



While competition to create the most visually stunning spa is at an all-time high in the region, spa owners and operators must also work alongside specialists to ensure that spa design works to boost operations and the bottom line

# Perfect balance

Your Spa by Barr and Wray created heated pebble beds for the spa at The Dolder Grand, Switzerland





**W**ith hundreds of spas in the planning for the Middle East over the next few years, spa design will be big business in the region. Every owner and operator wants something unique, and, as a result, customers are now coming to expect that point of difference, that 'wow' factor, in the various places they visit.

However, the philosophy that bigger or brighter or shinier is better, often at the forefront of project development in the Middle East and Dubai particularly, will not work with spa design. Crucially, it is not just how spas look, though they can be stunning, works of art even, it is how they function that has a lasting impact — on business, staff and customers.

Aesthetics and functionality must work in harmony, and to achieve this, the use of specialist spa consultants and spa design companies is highly recommended.

These spa specialists, many of whom have worked on the spa 'shop floor' themselves, have recognised the need for their skills in the region

and the market is set to welcome some major players over the course of the year.

Already on the scene are local companies Spa Resources International (part of Wafi Health and Leisure) and Beauty Leaders, while more recently Finex Spa Solutions, Barr and Wray and Schletterer Spa and Wellness have entered the Middle East's burgeoning spa market.

Other major European companies ESPA and Spa Developments are set to open offices in Dubai and/or Abu Dhabi within the next 12 months, while Raison D'Étre is also heavily focused on development here in the region.

This is exciting news for owners and operators. ESPA, for example, has 300 spas globally, manages 50, plus has 50 branded spas and 80 under construction. It currently has offices in the UK, Hong Kong, Miami and San Francisco.

ESPA chief executive Sue Harmsworth — a spa guru partly responsible for the evolution of the very word spa, with close to 40 years in the industry — explains why now is the right time for the company to come to Dubai.

"We've got about 20 projects in the Middle East under construction, in Dubai, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia — all over really," she says.

"Without in any way knocking the industry in Dubai, which obviously is huge, I think the spas have been a little bit behind. We have very high brand standards on space, budgets and training, so for us it's now perfect timing and the roll-out will start probably in 2009," she says.

She revealed the company is working with One&Only, Trump and Ritz-Carlton, and that in order to maintain its brand standards, will now only designs spa that it also operates.

This strategy reflects the one fundamental premise that spa developers must keep in mind — spa design is inextricably linked to spa operations, and therefore plays a significant role in sustaining the bottom line.

Over the next few pages, *Spa Manager* will address some key spa design issues, from creating the flow to 'going green', and analyse their impact on operations. What becomes very clear, is that looks definitely aren't everything.



### CREATING THE FLOW

Quite simply, assert international spa consultants and architects, spa design directly influences the flow and functionality of a spa, thus impacting the customer experience.

Anna Bjurstam, concepts director at Raison d'Étre, which has recently designed the spa at Atlantis, The Palm, says this is crucial for owners to remember because it is the spa experience that customers pay for, not just the treatment.

"I believe that in the future what we can charge for is the experience. A massage is not just a massage where ever it's executed, so it's the experience around the massage that's important.

"In the design, you have to build in that experience," she continues.

"You need a conceptual design with a well thought through journey. Look at the detail that makes a difference to the experience."

This includes offering the cold towel in the right place, and therefore having the fridge in the right place to provide the towel, she says.

"Once you create this really heightened experience, especially in the Middle East, then people will pay whatever it takes to come into that spa," says Bjurstam.

However, the flow doesn't just add to the experience; it can just as easily detract from it.

"If the design does not take into consideration the right flow, then the spa starts having operational problems," says Yesim Engin of Finex Spa Solutions, a new player in Dubai responsible for Jasmine Spa at Grand Millennium, Dubai.

"The aim in any well-operated spa is to create in the minds of its clients a wish to spend more time there. Nobody would want to spend a long time in a badly-designed closed space. The thing to remember is that functionality is as important as the design," continues Engin.

Beauty Leaders' director of operations Liane Bakaou agrees that the design of a spa has a major impact on the flow and guest experiences.

"From the time the guest enters the spa they expect their experience to be pleasurable and without obstacles, they do not want to have to walk down a long hallway to find the changing area, and then have to walk all the way back again to go for their treatment in another part of the spa," she says.

Susan Harmsworth of ESPA adds: "What if you want to go from your room to the spa in your robe without entering public areas? How will the back of house work so it doesn't intrude on the operation? There's just so much to consider.

"I still to this day see plans for treatment rooms next to exercise studios and above ball-rooms, and people don't think of adjacencies or connectivity within the hotel," she says.

Dr Gerald Huber, regional director UAE/GCC, Schletterer Wellness and Spa Design, says that function flow should be self-evident and logical for the guest, with no need for orientation.

"With the right function flow, you fill up the spa. It defines profit and loss at the end," concludes Huber.

### CASE STUDY: CREATING AN AIRPORT SPA

This year Spa Resources International (SRI) took on a major spa design challenge at Etihad Airways Diamond First Class Lounge and Pearl Business Class Lounge at Terminal-1 Abu Dhabi International Airport in the UAE.

The brief, explains Wafi Health and Leisure director Daniella Russell, also director of SRI, was to create a spa for each lounge, each with the maximum number of treatment and shower rooms within the available space.

"We felt it was important that the total design concept encapsulated the spa experience so privacy within this space was essential. We worked alongside the design team to provide them with an operational and functional perspective of creating a spa," Russell says.

"The brief was very specific — to achieve complete privacy and to create an interim escape from the noise of an airport environment. We considered the target audience (business and leisure travellers) as instrumental to the concept and operation," says Russell.

Accompanying the specific brief was a very strict, and therefore challenging, time limit.

"Our objective was to deliver a practical operational flow, quality guest handling and develop a treatment experience within five weeks. We continually ensured that the fit-out was absolutely accurate. This was running parallel to operations and recruitment; we managed to source and internationally train 20 staff within that short time-frame," says Russell.

She describes the themes of the spas as "modern urban contemporary style, chic and stylish" and in keeping with the Etihad lounges and the needs of its high-end travellers.

"The walls and floor are in black marble with accents of peacock blue offset by a silver fish scale wall dressing that reflects the down lights to create a feeling of warmth and depth," says Russell.

The 46m<sup>2</sup> First Class Lounge features a spa with five treatment rooms, two experience showers and a reception area, while the slightly larger Business Class Lounge has six treatment rooms, two experience showers and a reception area.

Russell says the team's vision was to balance function, aesthetics and operation.

"A visually stunning spa doesn't suggest it is efficient and practical operation," she asserts.

"We delivered on all accounts," says Russell. "The functional aspect of the project also shaped the final design. The chairs are Intelligent Massage Chairs, they look stunning and can be programmed to provide an all over body treatment fully clothed, while the therapist performs a facial at the same time.

"The benefit of the design allows for limited need of space, as the therapist isn't performing massage around a massage table," she says.

SRI worked in partnership with the Dubai-based branch of UK interior design company Above Consultancy on the project.



Treatment in an Intelligent Massage Chair



Relaxation at Etihad T1-Lounge



“If you can get a good spa consultant who checks all the plans, then you can use any architect or interior designer because they get briefed properly”



Sauna at Mohr Life Resort, Austria, by Schletterer Wellness and Spa Design

of a new-build, and it can be challenging if there are pillars in the way, non-removeable walls ceiling heights etc,” he says.

Engin adds: “I would say to refurbish a spa is much more difficult than to refurbish any other area in a hotel, unless refurbishment means just changing the decoration without touching the main functions, but if refurbishment is done with a goal to incorporate new trends in the spa business then there are many considerations.

“For example, do the additional functions you want incorporated require plumbing, technical or insulation?”

Harmsworth whole-heartedly agrees: “If you make mistakes in spas they’re much harder to rectify than in a bedroom or with food and beverage. Once you’ve got the flow wrong it’s very difficult to get it right without knocking the whole thing down and starting again”.

**GREEN DESIGN**

Going green is the latest trend in Dubai at the moment, with companies implementing recycling systems and developers considering long term solutions to environmental challenges. However, little has actually been achieved yet and although the spa industry at first glance seems to be one that should implement green measures on account of its move towards the natural and organic, this is more challenging than it might appear.

Harmsworth explains: “Sustainability is a big topic and I’ve attended some brainstorming meetings with some very key players all over the world on it. One of the things coming through loud and clear is that it’s got to have integrity. If you’re going to do sustainability, you can’t tokenise it, you have to do it well.

“And that’s very difficult with spas, especially city spas, because the mechanical/electrical side comprises 45% of the budget, and even more so in a place like Dubai where you need air conditioning year-round,” she continues.

“It’s hard because the engineering side is so important. For instance, we’ve got one project where all the condensation and all the internal energy is being ploughed back to heating the pool and things like that, so there’s lots of things you can do, but you need good engineers in order to sustain that,” says Harmsworth.

Engin suggests that there are several measures that can be taken, but that educating the staff is vital.

“Green is the trend. There are many ways to incorporate this into spas; energy-saving systems, water-saving showerheads and taps, more treatments using natural biodegradable elements, but retraining of the staff regarding this is very important as well,” she says.

Bjurstam explains that Raison d’Etre now incorporates some simple environmental measures into all of its spas, but points out that these have to be incorporated at the outset.

“In the design, we build in waste management. So if you want a waste basket for plastic, paper

**DESIGN TRENDS ACCORDING TO THE EXPERTS**

“The medical input is increasingly important in the spa industry. It seems that this will be a major future trend.”

Peter Rietveld, MD, Your Spa by Barr and Wray

“The current key trends are ‘theme rooms’ with a unique design, and original implementation of services.”

Liane Bakaou, director of operations, Beauty Leaders LLC, Abu Dhabi

“As spa design is a part of global design trends I would say that urban chic with a good emphasis of interior harmony and rhythm, combined with a care for a greener world is the trend.”

Yesim Engin, business development manager, Finex Spa Solutions

“Influences come from ageless ageing, self-awareness, holistic senses and a mix of cultural healing and modern medicine.”

Dr Gerald Huber, regional director UAE/GCC, Schletterer Wellness and Spa Design

“It’s not so much trends, it’s defining what you are and who you are”

Susan Harmsworth, chief executive, ESPA

“Look at the detail that makes a difference to the spa experience”

Anna Bjurstam, concepts director, Raison d’Etre

“Everyone wants individualism. Themes often come from the owner.”

Daniella Russell, director, Wafi Health and Leisure, parent company of Spa Resources International





Spa lobby at Capella Castlemartin in Ireland by Raison d'Étre

and organic material you have to have that built in from the start," she says.

Bjurstam adds that the company is also looking at energy-saving showers, treating water in pools with ozone and UV instead of chlorine and using organic linen and organic uniforms.

"On a larger scale it's always a discussion with the owner and what investment they can make. What happens with environmental projects is that it is a bigger investment up front, but then they save money when it's operational," she says.

"I think that in the Middle East, the money is there and creating environmentally friendly spas will be very important for the future.

"We're halfway there in the philosophy, so also need to deliver that when it comes to structure," says Bjurstam.

Russell adds that SRI is starting some studies on green spas.

"We're looking to see how we can build an eco-friendly spa," she says.

"The issue here is most spas are situated in the heart of a hotel. Where are their solar panels going to be and how will they be dedicated to the spa?" asks Russell.

### IMPACT ON REVENUES

With green spas still something of the future in the Middle East, concerns at the moment are focused on how the design of a spa can ease its operations and boost its profitability. This is especially important in a region where spa operators are under pressure to prove the value of their business to hoteliers and investors.

There is a risk that mistakes at design stage can cause problems for frontline staff and the owner's back pocket.

According to Rietveld, the most costly design mistakes are a lack of water-proofing and the installation of cheap water filtration systems and

ventilation systems: "To buy they are cheap, but to run they are dear," he says.

Specialists must also be employed for these services; an all too common mistake is for people to rely on landscape architects to do their water treatment engineering, he adds.

When it comes to design mistakes, the most costly ones are those that are detected too late and that cannot be corrected, says Bakaou.

"This can have a serious impact on the operation of any wellness facility," she explains.

"This can range from being stuck with poorly designed, non-functional wet rooms, not allocating enough storage spaces around the spa — almost all spas are short on storage space — and forgetting the importance of the back of house and laundry facilities. If a spa cannot function optimally it will reduce the services it can offer, in turn reducing revenue," says Bakaou.

Bjurstam emphasises this: "We're a laundry institution. We have to design to take care of both businesses — laundry and spa. We're running both side by side and it's extremely important how these areas are put together."

Another thing to bear in mind is the time required for cleaning the spa, says Rietveld.

"If you don't design a spa correctly and walkways are too far or rooms are too big, the workers in a spa need too much time for preparation and cleaning," he points out.

"If clients can be moved around quickly without noticing it and workers can be quick with their cleanings and preparations, idle times can be low, more time can be sold, therefore more money can be made," explains Rietveld.

Proper consideration of the retail area at design stages also fundamentally impacts revenues," observes Engin.

"The most common mistake regarding the layout of the spa is when functions are not linked correctly or when the retail area is not created with a knowledge of how sales in a spa are made. Then the revenue is diminished, customer dissatisfaction starts and in some more serious cases the treatments become less effective," she says.

To boost the bottom line, consideration can also be taken at design stages to create areas that can create a customer experience without requiring extensive staffing.

Spa Finder president Susie Ellis observes: "I've seen some very successful concepts created using hydrothermal facilities.

"You provide a different kind of experience for people, where they can heave the health value of the contrast therapy of heat and cold, but the other thing is that those experiences provide a way for a spa to create spa experiences without using as many staff, because labour is a big issue in the spa industry.

"When you have a thermal or a hydro experience, you can have a lot of people using them and a few people supervising. Of course the up front investment is more, but you can provide some very interesting environments and experiences. With those hydro circuits you can also create a real social experience," adds Ellis.

However, Harmsworth says consumer demand is actually for more treatment time, so she argues that this consumer demand should be reflected in the number and size of treatment rooms on offer.

"What we're finding is that still the highest growth rate is for hands-on treatments and longer treatments, so that gets reflected in the number of treatment rooms you have," she says.

"Multi-functional treatment rooms — so you can keep a guest in one room for all their treatments — are also important," adds Harmsworth.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Barr and Wray: [www.your-spa.com](http://www.your-spa.com)  
 Beauty Leaders: [www.beautyleaders.com](http://www.beautyleaders.com)  
 ESPA: [www.espaonline.com](http://www.espaonline.com)  
 Finex Spa Solutions: [www.finexspasolutions.com](http://www.finexspasolutions.com)  
 Raison d'Étre: [www.raisondetroitrespas.com](http://www.raisondetroitrespas.com)  
 Schletterer Wellness and Spa Design: [www.schletterer.com](http://www.schletterer.com)  
 Spa Resources International: [www.spa-resources-international.com](http://www.spa-resources-international.com)

### FINAL THOUGHTS

The common attitude of the spa experts, despite also being asked about design trends and their own exciting projects, was to focus on the need to constantly consider operations alongside design. If anything, it seems that the 'wow' factor that is perhaps too often prioritised in this region should be brought into spa design only once the flow and customer journey have been created.

As Bjurstam says: "It's going back to managing functional spaces that also look good, so you really focus on the experiences." 