

A NEW



Graduate Hotels, led by chief creative officer Andrew Alford, is carving out a niche in the hospitality industry by designing hyperlocal experiences with a collegiate twist.

By Kelley Hunsberger





(previous page) The Graduate in Oxford, Mississippi, features a pink floor made from wire-brushed oak.

Andrew Alford detests beige. It's not really the color that bothers him, as much as what it often stands for: flatness, sameness, lifelessness. Take a scroll through his Instagram account and you'll find a curated campaign of color and energy. Check out one of his designs for Graduate Hotels—a fast-growing U.S. chain that serves university and college towns—and you'll find much of the same. The 3,000-square-

foot (279-square-meter) lobby of the company's Oxford, Mississippi, location, for example, features a wire-brushed, pink oak floor. The Bloomington, Indiana, hotel is covered in 20 different designed wallpapers, curated for their relation to Bloomington. And the lobby of the recently opened outpost in Seattle's university district features two 18-foot (1.67-meter) purple plaid couches.

Details like these have become a sort of signature for Alford, who serves as the company's chief creative officer. But instead of being interesting yet empty touches, these elements are part of each property's distinct design narrative, which can only be described as hyperlocal. Instead of putting together just another place to sleep and shower, Alford and his team set out to curate experiences for alumni, sports fans, tourists, and parents of students wholly inspired by a school, its town, and its history.

"It's about creating a sense of place so that when someone wakes up in a Graduate Hotel room they know exactly where they are based on the visual cues around them," Alford says. "This is the core of our philosophy."

Take the Bloomington property, located less than a mile from the campus of Indiana University. The design includes chandeliers made out of basketball hoops and bleachers sourced from local gymnasiums—an homage to the school's enduring legacy of basketball greatness. But that's just the obvious bit. The lobby floor features a crossword puzzle pattern inspired by Indiana University alumnus Will Shortz, the current crossword puzzle editor for *The New York Times*. And the 20 wallpapers used throughout the hotel pay tribute to great moments in the city's history, such as the many visits by the Dalai Lama or the town's 68-year-old Little 500 bike race.

"When an older person comes into our hotel and sees the vintage pieces, it gives them a sense of nostalgia. It evokes a glory days kind of feeling," Alford says. "When younger people come into our hotels, they think they're in a Wes Anderson movie. It allows us to hit a lot of different demographics without dumbing anything down, without going beige, without going neutral. We can keep the design really exuberant, but everybody—no matter your age—comes into our hotels and sees something that resonates with them."

Perpetual Students

To create a one-of-a-kind, hyperlocal experience for each of its hotels, the Graduate team starts with research. They visit the town, tour the college campus, and eat at the local restaurants. They speak to alumni, local business owners, and long-time residents. They scour yearbooks, newspaper archives, and history books. And they dig through local flea markets, thrift stores, and even eBay.



Walter Van Beirendonck

Like many designers, Alford often turns to fashion for inspiration. "Fashion moves a lot faster than interiors," he says. He's particularly inspired by the works of Belgian designer Walter Van Beirendonck, whose abstract designs often feature deconstructed forms and bold colors. "No one is doing in interior design the equivalent to what he's doing in fashion," Alford adds.

Jacques Garcia

According to Alford, the French architect, interior designer, and landscape designer is really good at details. "The broad strokes are the easy part," he says. "It's that last 10 percent that really gets me excited."



Photos courtesy of Andrew Alford; (Walter Van Beirendonck) @Frederik Vercruysee; (Jacques Garcia) @Eric Sander



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—Andrew Alford



SPARKS OF INSPIRATION

When Andrew Alford is feeling less than creative, he turns to various outlets to stimulate new thinking. "My house is filled with contemporary photography and really unusual art," he says. "And a lot of times I like to put on really obscure electronica music and let my mind drift."

But, like most people, what inspires Alford often changes. Here are two people who are big motivators for him now.

That eagerness to discover and learn is part of the company's culture. "Our tagline is, 'We Are All Students,'" Alford says. "There's no pride of information having to come from this up on high source. We try to keep our eyes and ears and all of our senses open to learning at every chance we have to find those little diamond in the rough stories."

While doing research in Minneapolis for the company's location near the University of Minnesota campus, for example, the team struck up a conversation with their Uber driver one evening. "We asked [the driver] what everyone associates with the city. Immediately he answered, 'Walleye, everyone eats walleye.'" It was a seemingly random response that inspired a key design element for the now-open hotel. "We ended up having a staff member do chalk sketches of walleye fish and every bathroom has these drawings of life-size walleye in them. All of that came from this talk we had with an Uber driver."

But Alford's designs are by no means just a combination of vintage pieces and random bursts of inspiration. "We don't start with pretty," Alford says. "We start with a story. Like an author writes a book, we always try to write the space first." For Alford, this approach is a basic instinct—he graduated from college with a degree in English literature and an emphasis in creative writing.

"Our first Graduate was in Athens, Georgia, near the University of Georgia campus, and my impression of Athens is that it's kind of *A Tale of Two Cities*. There's a really classic Southern thing going on, but then Athens also has a very weird side to it, a very alternative side." The resulting space has a vibe that pulls together these two juxtaposing attitudes. The hotel features a preppy color palette mixed with florals and traditional furniture. The guestroom design includes chalkboards with the chemical equation for a sweet tea (a local staple), bulldog lamps (a nod to the University of Georgia mascot), and custom-made pillows that feature a picture of a double-barrel cannon (a local landmark). At the same time, the hotel's small music venue, The Foundry, hosts bands throughout the year that reflect the town's distinct sound. Room keycards feature famous alumni and hometown heroes such as R.E.M. frontman Michael Stipe. And the background music often plays local musicians such as the B-52s, Matthew Sweet, and Widespread Panic.

Becoming the Graduate

Bringing these spaces to life is a dream job for Alford.

"If you stop and think about hotels—and this is the core of why I love what I do—every single aspect of our lives happens at a hotel," he says. "When you start

dating somebody, you do that first trip away together and you stay in a hotel. When you get married you stay in a hotel. When my husband and I adopted our daughter—she was born in Colorado—we had about two weeks before we were allowed to take her home while the paperwork was going through that we had to stay in a hotel. Literally all of our memories of the first two weeks of our life with our daughter are in a SpringHill Suites by Marriott. Any aspect of life that you think about, a hotel is often the stage set for that."

And while Airbnb is claiming some of the market, Alford believes hotels can offer something homestay companies have yet to conquer: service. It's a lesson that was driven home for him in November 2015 while staying at an Airbnb in Paris. "Ever since I was little, I've always dreamed of living in Paris," Alford says. "[The Airbnb] provided that illusion." Then terrorists attacked the Bataclan concert hall and the city was thrown into chaos. It was a scary time, and because he was staying in an Airbnb and not a hotel, Alford had no local support that could help him navigate the situation.

"There's this realization that Airbnbs can provide a fantasy that you're living like a local, but it doesn't come with any of the services of a hotel," he says. "I think what we're able to do at the Graduate is design hyperlocal, so it feels like that local community. We're providing that fantasy through design while providing the traditional support of a hotel. It's the best of both worlds in my mind."

But, while the road to the Graduate was filled with lessons that shape how Alford designs today, the journey wasn't always easy. Only 15 years ago, Alford was nearly destitute. At the time, he was working for a small residential designer in San Francisco. One seemingly normal day, he walked into the firm only to find his stuff—and the stuff of his co-workers—packed into boxes. The entire staff was being let go.

Alford was out of work for more than a year. He lost his apartment, his car, and was in the process of applying for food stamps when an acquaintance introduced him to a contact at Kimpton Hotels and the stars finally began to align. Alford got a job as design

HIDDEN GEMS

Every Graduate Hotel is filled with details inspired by a local college or university, the town, and its history.

Ann Arbor, Michigan

The lobby of this location near the University of Michigan features a large mural created by local artists depicting the work process—from assembly to final product—of the university's engineering students.



Berkeley, California

The shelves behind the reception desk of this location near the University of California, Berkeley, hold more than 8,000 copies of *National Geographic* magazine. The publication's yellow spine is California Gold—one of the school's primary colors.



Lincoln, Nebraska

Old-fashioned television sets serve as nightstands in the guestrooms at this location. It's a nod to legendary late-night host Johnny Carson, who attended the nearby University of Nebraska-Lincoln.



manager and was responsible for keeping the company's existing portfolio—which included about 40 hotels at the time—looking its best. That ranged from replacing stolen pillows to redesigning a lobby and refreshing hotel rooms. At the same time, he was responsible for the atmospheric story—the music, lighting, and scents—that he says really bring the design to life.

For Alford, the Kimpton job was a career-defining moment. It gave the designer, who began his interior design career in "old school, old world very high-end New York decorating," his first taste of hospitality design. The job also eventually gave Alford enough confidence to set out on his own. And just a few years later he would meet Ben Weprin, founder of AJ Capital, owner of Graduate Hotels. "One of my clients, Joie De Vivre Hotels, called me and asked me if I would be willing to travel to Chicago and meet with this guy. [AJ Capital] had bought a hotel in the city's Lincoln Park neighborhood. Joie De Vivre was going to be managing it, and they thought I would be a good candidate for the design."

The meeting with Weprin was a kind of "love at first sight moment," Alford says. "He and I see hotels and what they should look like, with a sense of authenticity and eccentricity, the same way." The job went so well that in 2013 Weprin called Alford and told him to close up shop in San Francisco and move to Chicago. "He said, 'we're going to open a brand of hotels called The Graduate, and you're going to design every single one of them,'" Alford says.

Today, the Graduate Hotels has expanded to 75 employees. In just over five years the company has opened 13 hotels, with another 20 set to open in the next two years. CNBC has dubbed it the "anti-Airbnb," *Inc.* named it a winner of its 2017 Design Awards, and *Fast Company* awarded it a place on its 2018 Most Innovative Companies list.

"One of the things I talk to young designers about a lot is persistence," Alford says. "If you want to make it and have this long career, there are times that are going to be bleak and you will want to quit. I'm living proof if you just stick with it and come to the table with a unique point of view, you can make it." ■

(below)
The Graduate in Athens, Georgia is curated down to the tiniest detail in hope that guests will discover something that resonates.



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Photos by: courtesy Andrew Alford