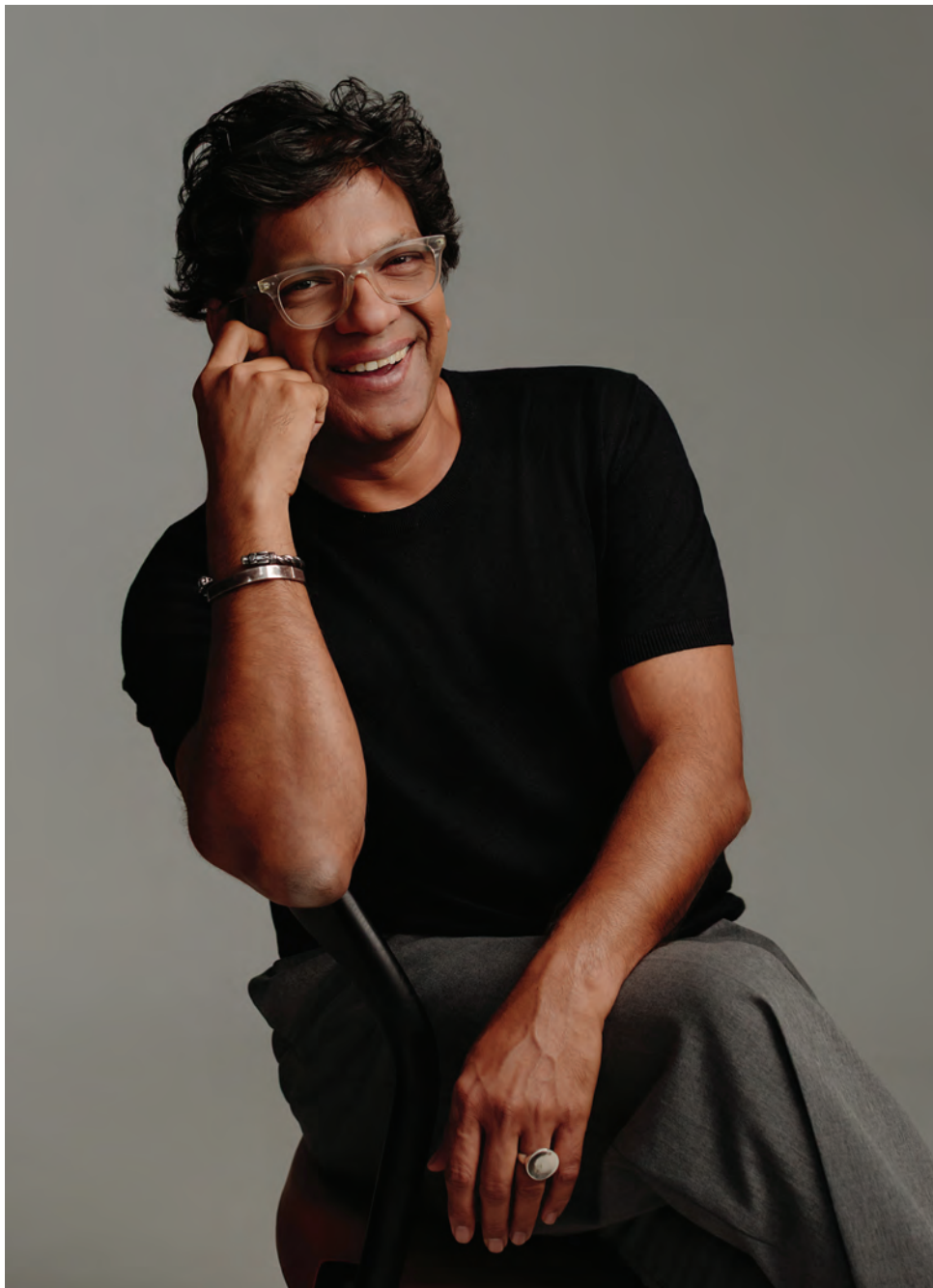


# One Continuous Experience

Rahul Shankwalker, Partner at HBA shares his thoughts on designing immersive experiences for hospitality



I have always believed that hospitality is one of architecture's most generous acts. It gives us the opportunity to create spaces that briefly suspend the ordinary, places where people feel cared for, inspired, restored, and connected. Long after guests forget the room number or the layout of a lobby, they remember how a place made them feel. They remember the calm of arrival, the warmth of evening light, the scent in the corridor, the ease of movement, the intimacy of a restaurant, how intuitively, calmly, with compassion and kindness service was delivered, and the sense of belonging that quietly stayed with them after departure. That, to me, is the real measure of hospitality design.

In many ways, guests form their opinion within the first few hours of entering a hotel or resort. Everything that follows either deepens that first impression or slowly erodes it. The most successful hospitality environments understand this instinctively. They are not experienced as separate departments or isolated design moments. They are felt as one continuous journey.

For a city like Dubai, where ambition and excellence continue to redefine the global benchmark, this matters greatly. The city welcomed 15.7 million international visitors last year, and with the Department of Economy and Tourism targeting more than 20 million visitors in the near future, expectations around hospitality will only rise.

As destinations compete more intensely for attention, loyalty and repeat visitation, design can no longer be viewed as decoration layered onto a business model. It has become central to commercial performance, guest memory and market differentiation. Yet many hospitality projects are still delivered through a fragmented sequence. Architecture defines massing and circulation. Interiors follow later. Lighting is introduced separately. Branding arrives toward the end. F&B concepts are overlaid somewhere in between. Each discipline may be highly capable, but when ideas are passed from one hand to another in stages, something valuable is often lost.

The original vision becomes diluted through compromise. Timelines stretch. Revisions multiply. Clients can find themselves coordinating consultants rather than advancing a cohesive idea. Most importantly, the guest ultimately feels this fragmentation, even if they cannot name it. A hotel may look impressive, yet still feel disconnected.

Guests are remarkably sensitive to coherence. They notice when arrival feels intuitive, when lighting supports mood rather than fights it, when acoustics allow conversation, when materials age gracefully, when wayfinding is effortless, and when the transition from lobby to restaurant to room feels natural rather than abrupt. These details are rarely remembered individually, but together they create trust, comfort and emotional ease. This is why we developed integrated models such as ONE



HBA. It is a way of thinking where hospitality experiential branding strategy, architecture, interiors, lighting, art, graphics, branding and F&B are considered together from the outset, guided by one clear narrative rather than assembled in fragments later.

This early strategic phase is critical, as it defines not only how a place will look, but how it will feel and be remembered. It shapes the emotional rhythm of arrival, the personality of the brand, the guest journey, and how service is ultimately delivered, intuitively, calmly, with compassion and kindness.

The intention is not that one studio must do everything, nor that specialist expertise loses value. In fact, expertise becomes stronger when working in concert. What matters is a unified creative direction that protects the integrity of the guest experience from concept through to completion. Importantly, this approach also allows flexibility. We can work as a fully integrated collective or as individual specialist disciplines, depending on the needs of each client and project. The principle remains the same: coherence creates value.

When disciplines think together early, the benefits are practical as well as emotional. Projects tend to move with greater clarity. Unnecessary iterations reduce. Delivery becomes more efficient. Materials can be selected not only for visual appeal, but for durability and operational logic. Lighting can respond to daylight rhythms. Vertical circulation can become part of the branded experience rather than a forgotten transition. Acoustics, graphics and spatial flow can reinforce one another instead of competing.

The result is not simply a better designed hotel. It is a better performing one.

But performance in hospitality is not measured only through numbers. It is also measured through memory. Through whether a guest chooses to return. Through whether they recommend the place to someone they care about. Through whether a space becomes part of their personal story.

My formative years studying in Goa, a place shaped deeply by tourism and hospitality, taught me something important. Before design became divided into rigid silos, places were often made through a more unified logic.

Climate, craft, ritual, material and use were considered together. The outcomes were not always polished by modern standards, but they often felt whole. That sense of wholeness is something worth reclaiming, not as nostalgia, but as discipline.

Hospitality now asks projects to achieve many things at once: commercial performance, cultural relevance, operational clarity and emotional resonance. Meeting those expectations requires more than good taste. It requires a more unified way of working, where design evolves as one continuous experience rather than a sequence of handovers. Hospitality deserves that clarity. The real question now is how quickly our industry is willing to make it the standard rather than the exception.

**This page** – (from left)  
Hilton Maldives Amingiri  
Resort & Spa; Taj Puri Resort;  
**Left page** – Rahul Shankhwalker,  
Partner at HBA