

LODGING

A Clean Slate



Designing a new brand not only means *a vision*, but also the ability to put *guests first*.

Dodd Mitchell, Founder
KEPT Hotels & Resorts
John DePaul, Executive Vice
President, Development,
Sonesta Collection

by LEN VERMILLION

Unique CHARACTER

In building up KEPT Hotels & Resorts, veteran hotel designer Dodd Mitchell is putting guests front and center. **And, no two hotels will be the same.**

For a highly acclaimed hotel designer and developer, Dodd Mitchell has a humble, almost “aw shucks” type of personality when it comes to discussing his work. Although he speaks excitedly about his projects, and design in general, Mitchell is never one to put himself in the limelight.

“If it becomes about me, then I haven’t done my job,” he says.

It’s quite a humble notion from a man who over the years has become one of the most recognizable faces in hotel design. If you’re a seasoned traveler, or simply an aficionado of hotels, you’re probably familiar with Mitchell’s work. He’s the creative mind behind the designs of such notable properties as The Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood, Thompson Hotel Beverly Hills, and Cabo Azul Resort & Mi Vida Hotel in Los Cabos, Mexico, to name a few. But his latest project is a lifetime in the making, and one that gets him excited enough that he could talk about it for hours on end.



Dodd Mitchell, Founder, KEPT Hotels & Resorts; John DePaul, Executive Vice President, Development, Sonesta Collection; Stephanie Sonnabend, President & CEO, Sonesta International Hotels Corporation

Photographer: Jonathan Kannair

Earlier this year, Mitchell, in a collaborative partnership with Sonesta International Hotels Corporation, announced that they would be launching a new brand of deluxe lifestyle boutique hotels through the renovation and repositioning of select urban and resort destinations. For Mitchell, the creation of his own brand, called KEPT Hotels & Resorts, is a journey that began many, many years ago.

“As I’ve been building my company for all these years, I knew it was time to take the next step,” Mitchell says. “Design is what I was born with, service is what I admire. I love making people smile.”

Having conquered the world of design, Mitchell, who spends most of his days “living” in hotels due to his heavy travel schedule, says he’s come to realize that a hotel is ultimately about guests. And, he’s aiming to design hotels that put the focus squarely on guest satisfaction. In the process, he’s setting out to create a new brand from scratch, one that won’t necessarily fit into the mold of so-called “lifestyle” or “boutique” hotels.

“I don’t like the word ‘boutique.’ I don’t like the word ‘brand.’ It started to become like the Kim Kardashian of hotels. Everybody thought they were so cool,” Mitchell says. “If we design hotels, it’s about our guests. Somewhere along the line during the last 10 years of my career, operators have become celebrities and I never quite got that. I want to create a place where people can feel they are a part of it.”

To that end, Mitchell looked for a partnership where he could be confident that his guests will get genuine service. “It’s not about velvet ropes,” he says. “What happened to calling for room service and it shows up?”

His quest led him to Sonesta, a 60-year-old, family-operated hotel collection consisting of 33 hotels and resorts. Sonesta was founded in the 1940s by A.M. Sonnabend, and is today managed by a number of third-generation family members, including President and CEO Stephanie Sonnabend.

Sonnabend says that the vision for KEPT is clearly Mitchell’s. “This is a very exciting opportunity for us because we’ve not had an offering in the lifestyle/boutique area,” she says. “It’s an opportunity for us. One of the new strategies we were looking at was to be able to offer a spectrum of branding solutions. This fits very nicely into that.”

“Once it was clear that we were lacking an upper-upscale boutique brand,” says John DePaul, executive vice presi-

dent of development at Sonesta Collection, “I reached out to Dodd, who always had an interest in a brand of his own. We can certainly layer into Dodd’s vision and thought about the service and standards. The fit is very comfortable. It completes our story. We can now offer in that space a very unique and original approach.”

DePaul says that the emergence of the independent, lifestyle boutique segment—which is less than 5 percent of the total hotel inventory in the United States—is the next segment that should “explode.” “This segment is growing because of the emergence of the demographic that is now enjoying that independent character,” he says. “People want character and personality.”

BORN FROM EXPERIENCE

KEPT Hotels & Resorts is expected to consist of 80- to 300-room properties located in gateway cities and notable resort



Dodd Mitchell is the creative mind behind the designs of such notable properties as Cabo Azul Resort in Los Cabos, Mexico.

destinations throughout the United States and Europe. Mitchell and DePaul both say that the portfolio will span a range of project types, including conversions, renovations, rebranding, and repositioning. Each property will offer local influences through the use of local craftsmen and artisans.

One thing it will not be, according to Mitchell, is a “lifestyle” brand. “That’s another word I can’t stand—‘lifestyle,’” he says. “To me it’s one of the most arrogant ways to put it. Who are you to say how someone should live their life?”

Much of Mitchell’s vision for the new brand was born from his own experiences in hotels. He says that he’s stayed in so many, he’s recognized things that “drive him crazy.” For example: he abhors the idea of a hotel dictating the way the guest experience should go. To wit, he says KEPT is focused more on the idea of saying to the guest, “It’s your life, you live it.” “Here’s a stage,” Mitchell, a former set designer, says of his brand’s role in the guest experience.

From a design and service standpoint, Mitchell says his vision for KEPT Hotels & Resorts centers on what he terms something between a W hotel and a Four Seasons. “No one’s doing anything in between,” he says.

When asked what the vision for KEPT Hotels & Resorts is inspired by, Mitchell simply answers, “It’s all in my head.” He’s been planning the brand for many years, spending late nights drawing designs and working on the details of everything from logos to employee uniforms. While brand development is well underway, Mitchell stays mum on the details, not ready yet to make his concepts completely public.

“There’s so much you’re about to see when we start coming out with this,” he says. “I’ve been holding back. When we’re drawing late at night there are designs where I say, ‘OK, they’re not seeing that yet.’”

A LITTLE RESPECT

As a designer, Mitchell makes a point to revisit the properties he’s designed several years later. He likes to check up on the operations and ensure that that the original design and service intent is being upheld. “It breaks my heart when it’s not,” he says.

DePaul, who has known Mitchell for years and has worked with the designer on several previous projects, can verify Mitchell’s passion for details. “We’ve walked around hotels and restaurants that he’s done and he does get offended when he turns the keys over and it’s not being respected,” he says.

DePaul says he views Sonesta’s role, in which it will oversee operations of the hotels, as “the curator of Dodd’s space.”

“That’s always been my biggest problem. It’s like handing your kid over,” Mitchell says. “I still get calls about places complaining about things such as the tuna. I don’t own it so there’s nothing I can do.”

But that’s one of the reasons Mitchell is excited to build KEPT, properties where he will have a say in the operations and service. He says he’s very comfortable

with Sonesta as caretaker of that vision, and believes the company holds the same respect for details.

“With Sonesta, I love the history. There’s generations of family,” Mitchell says. “That right there says KEPT.”

While KEPT Hotels & Resorts will have a place under the umbrella of Sonesta properties, DePaul says guests won’t see Sonesta inside of KEPT. KEPT will be its own brand and Sonesta won’t be featured on the branding. “The brand is going to be very original,” DePaul says.

BUILDING UP

For all of the elaborate designs that Mitchell has come up with throughout his career, one notable aspect of his creativity is that he’s always been focused on price points. “This is a business and because Dodd designs the way he does, as dramatic and as wonderful as they are, they’re not expensive,” DePaul says of the price points to building up the hotels and the brand as a whole. “We’re going to have investors within our publicly traded company, investors who Dodd knows personally, investors who I know personally, who are going to invest in our story and it has to make sense.”

DePaul says that story is to build the brand through re-adaptive use of existing hotels. “We’re going to clearly be buying assets well below replacement costs and it will give us the ability to put in what’s needed and renovate, reposition, and personalize the asset,” he says.

“When I’m approaching a design, I value-engineer,” Mitchell adds. “What people spend on a restaurant in Vegas, I do whole hotels for, and that’s a key thing to this business model. It’s not only to make them look beautiful, but also to make money.”

Mitchell says when he’s designing a hotel he likes to get money back from food and beverage and other like aspects of the hotel within the first year. “You value-engineer before you even pick up your pencil,” he says of his design process. “It doesn’t need to go overboard because people aren’t there to see that.”

Mitchell says creativity is the key to finding assets. “Some of the assets we’re looking at repositioning right now, you wouldn’t even sleep in,” he says. But that won’t stop Mitchell from turning them around.

He says he likes to first get immersed in the local community before even touring a potential asset. “I walk around the town, see the museums, before I even go see the asset. You become a part of the community first,” he says.

And that, he says, will help him keep each KEPT hotel and resort individualized and unique. ■



Scan this bar code with your smartphone for more from Dodd Mitchell as he discusses hotel design, inspiration, and his vision for KEPT Hotels & Resorts.