



by DW

## A HOTEL STORY

San Juan, *Puerto Rico*

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From its more-is-more Seventies aesthetic to its amenities with a difference, this design-led property is a whole mood. Divas welcome

I'm a bit of a sucker for the 1970s. The music, mostly, but there's something about that pre-tech age of creative expression – a maelstrom of California dreaming, Studio 54 glitz and bold design. This was all before my time, though: as a child of the 1980s I can only look back with fuchsia-tinted glasses, enjoying the more artistic elements of the era without the strains of its social and political upheavals (much of which led to its prodigious creative output).

But, as we navigate our present-day social and political unrest, we still keep the bold, creative optimism of the 1970s on a glittering pedestal. It's like Andy Warhol once said, "everyone must have a fantasy".

For hotelier Stephan Watts, the fantasy was very much of that era. "It has been a childhood dream of mine to open a 1970s-themed motel," he says. "I grew up on disco – and living in Berlin in the early 2000s further cultivated my interest in Seventies architecture and interior design."

This aesthetic appreciation is one Watts shares with fellow interiors curator (and handcraft artist) Roy Delgado, with whom he launched a collection of boutique properties around Puerto Rico, starting with the much lauded Dreamcatcher, San Juan, in 2012. During the pandemic, when the pair stumbled upon an abandoned Victorian house in the Santurce district, they knew their fantasy had found a home. The squat, concrete building would be transformed into Mood Haus: a set of four apartments each with its own retro design and colour palette. ▶▶



The first unit finished was Grace – named for Grace Jones. A sultry studio of soft powder pinks and bold reds, it features wall murals and a mixture of curves and sharp lines. A second studio, Donna – as in Summer – is a sunshine-coloured affair resplendent in uplifting oranges and yellows. Gloria – named for Ms Gaynor – is a one-bedroom suite in calming shades of avocado, with beautiful floral walls of dusky greens and yellows.

My abode was Diana – for the one and only La Ross – a two-bedroom disco extravaganza. Here, Watts and Delgado have had more space to play with colours. The master bedroom is a bold expression in orange, red and gold, with shaggy pillows, statement lamps and a feature wall of circular geometric print. It should be too much, too psychedelic, yet it's not: the auburn-painted walls and the softness of the textiles tone it down to something sumptuous. In the second bedroom, the mood is far mellower, with hazy yellow floral wallpaper, soft brown tones and ornamental vintage cameras.

Meanwhile, the open living room and kitchen in Diana could be lifted right out of a 1976 lifestyle catalogue – each item carefully selected, including a long 'n' low orange sofa and round dining table with tulip chairs. As Diana Ross herself sang in *It's My House*: “There's my chair, I put it there. Everything you see is with love and care.”

“It was extremely hard to source Seventies furniture in Puerto Rico,” says Watts, “Especially during the pandemic.” But, dedicated to the vision, the pair trawled the island's thrift stores, browsed Etsy and Amazon and brought over a few pieces from New York. The distinctive wallpapers in each unit come



from a specialist wallpaper company in Germany, and artworks were commissioned by Puerto Rican artists: portraits of each diva by collage artist Cassandra (aka Selva Virgen), and wall murals by Angel Pagán. While there are flatscreen TVs, these are hidden behind covers made by Delgado, designed to preserve the time-warp ambience. Each unit has a working disco ball and a record player with a selection of vinyl to get you into the appropriate groove.

There's so much going on in the design, it's easy to forget that this is guesthouse-style accommodation. Amenities are simple, though elevated through style choices: a simple cafetière, but bright red; a plastic shower curtain, but translucent neon. Colour is key in the Mood Haus experience. Where using colour psychology has been a growing interiors trend in recent years, for Watts and Delgado, the process has been more experimental and free-spirited, in tune with the decade they're channelling.

“Our process was more intuitive than planned out,” admits Watts. “We typically don't work much with colour, so Mood Haus was the perfect project to get crazy with it. And we wanted our guests to have fun with these bold colours.”

But their intuition has led to four individual ambiances. A colour study at The School of Life deciphers orange as “a concentration of an energy and vitality that too often we lack”. The same essay describes red as adventurous, independent, assertive... not caring what anybody else thinks, and yellow as carefree, confident and hopeful. When I think about it, are these not the characteristics that draw so many of us to Seventies culture?

It's interesting that retro design can indulge such a sense of nostalgia, even for those of us who didn't experience it first-time round. And that's the power of design. Just as Seventies design itself was a rebellion against the minimalist and orderly movements before it, Mood Haus sets out to break a lot of rules – especially in terms of what is too much. In a world of “less is more”, some would consider this a tonic.

With that in mind, perhaps I'll leave the last word to Donna Summer: “It don't matter if it's day or night. We play in colour, not black 'n' white.”

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