

Club culture

by Claudia Baillie

Designing a members' club can be both prestigious and challenging – creating a unique atmosphere with real statement spaces also means juggling budgets and ever-diminishing deadlines. We find out how it's done

FROM HARD-WORKING co-working spaces and super-luxe layouts to women-only venues and those focused on wellness, members' clubs have come a long way since the stuffy cigar-and-newspaper gentlemen's establishments of the past. Soho House set a new precedent with its relaxed, homely vibe when it opened its first London club back in 1995, and a raft of other purpose-built social and networking spaces have followed suit. But how does the design of these clubs differ from a regular bar, hotel, or restaurant? The key, it seems, is flexibility. "We're seeing a huge shift towards multi-use spaces, especially in London," says Adam Farmerie, principal at New York-based design studio AvroKO. In November 2017, the practice completed Mortimer House, a members-only work and leisure destination in London's Fitzrovia. "The general trend is that a retail store will double as a café, a barber shop, or a movie theatre. People are optimising spaces and building in experiences to attract all demographics – and the same is true of members' clubs. History paints a picture of a stodgy, draped-in-darkness vibe, but these days it depends upon what the needs of members are." His colleague Kristina O'Neal, also a principal at the company, agrees. "It

makes things challenging, but also more entertaining as we get to think through a space in a variety of ways," she says. "People are eager to meet like-minded people in curated environments, and members' clubs have a 'choose your own adventure' quality that we love." This flexibility comes in to play depending on a club's focus. "A group might want a buzzy bar or a larger table, or – for a confidential chat or working on your laptop – you need a secluded spot," says Richard Hywel Evans, founder of Studio RHE, the architects responsible for the design of women-only private health and wellness members' club Grace Belgravia. Its Grade II-listed premises house not only a lounge and restaurant, but a gym, spa, and medical facilities, too. "You might go to Grace Belgravia, however, and there's a London Fashion Week show in one of the undefined areas that's not invading your space, but still providing the kind of energy that's important in these venues." From a practical point of view, every aspect needs to be highly functional and durability is paramount. "The turnaround in our clubs is massive, and I'm always astonished how much the furniture is used –

much more than in a restaurant or a hotel," says Linda Boronkay, design director at Soho House. "I can only compare it to an airport lounge and, as a result, everything needs to be bullet proof. We wire sockets and charging points into furniture, and fabrics need to be really hard-wearing. High coffee tables allow people to work and eat, so it's not just a lounge environment, and we combine those with mid and high-level working, dining, and bar spaces – all of which provide a comfortable platform so people can use it how they please. We also spend months perfecting the flow of a space, which is something we never compromise on. It's never the first, second, or even tenth option, because there's always a better layout." Spaces need to change in terms of atmosphere too – a key factor Squire & Partners architects were tasked with when designing The Ministry, the newly opened members' club and co-working space by the legendary Ministry of Sound music label and nightclub. "Members work in TV, film, music and fashion, and so more than any other client, The Ministry needed us to design for every moment of the day, week, or year, rather than as a constant," says partner Tim Gledstone. "The hours from



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Previous page: Mortimer House in Fitzrovia, with interiors designed by New York-based studio AvroKO.

Right and below left: Martin Brudnizki was charged with redesigning world-renowned members' club Annabel's in Mayfair.

Below: After Soho House opened its first London club, other purpose-built spaces followed suit. Opposite page: The Ministry, the members' club by record label and nightclub Ministry of Sound, is designed to accommodate the space's changing moods, which can vary from day to day and hour to hour.



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breakfast through to dinner on a Monday are very different to Friday when people are excited for the weekend, and 5pm in June is very different from 5pm in December. So the space is always evolving and the music, food, the amount of alcohol, and the number of guests changes constantly. There are tables the same height as the bar, where you can have croissants and coffee in the morning but that are strong enough to dance on in the evening. Engaging all the senses is also something we've taken to a new level, and there are different soundscapes throughout the club which change all the time."

Designer Martin Brudnizki is in tune with this kind of transition, too. The atmosphere, he says, has as much to do with the operation itself and how staff help alter the mood. "You can plan a space in detail, but that doesn't mean it will have personality - that's the magic of creating a strong narrative, so people feel it speaks to them, which is often the attraction of joining a club in the first place," says Brudnizki, who was charged by restaurateur Richard Caring with redesigning world-renowned members' club Annabel's. "Location and the history of a building also play a role. With Annabel's, we were inspired by the flora and fauna of Berkeley Square and by its garden, which is a rarity in London. The space might be total fantasy, but it's in context and the scheme celebrates the architecture and a mood relevant to Mayfair, which goes hand in hand with the visionary team who evoke and embody the spirit of the club. Members want something that feels accessible, but a little bit removed from their daily lives, and Annabel's is a very special place where you just know you're going to have fun."



Studio.

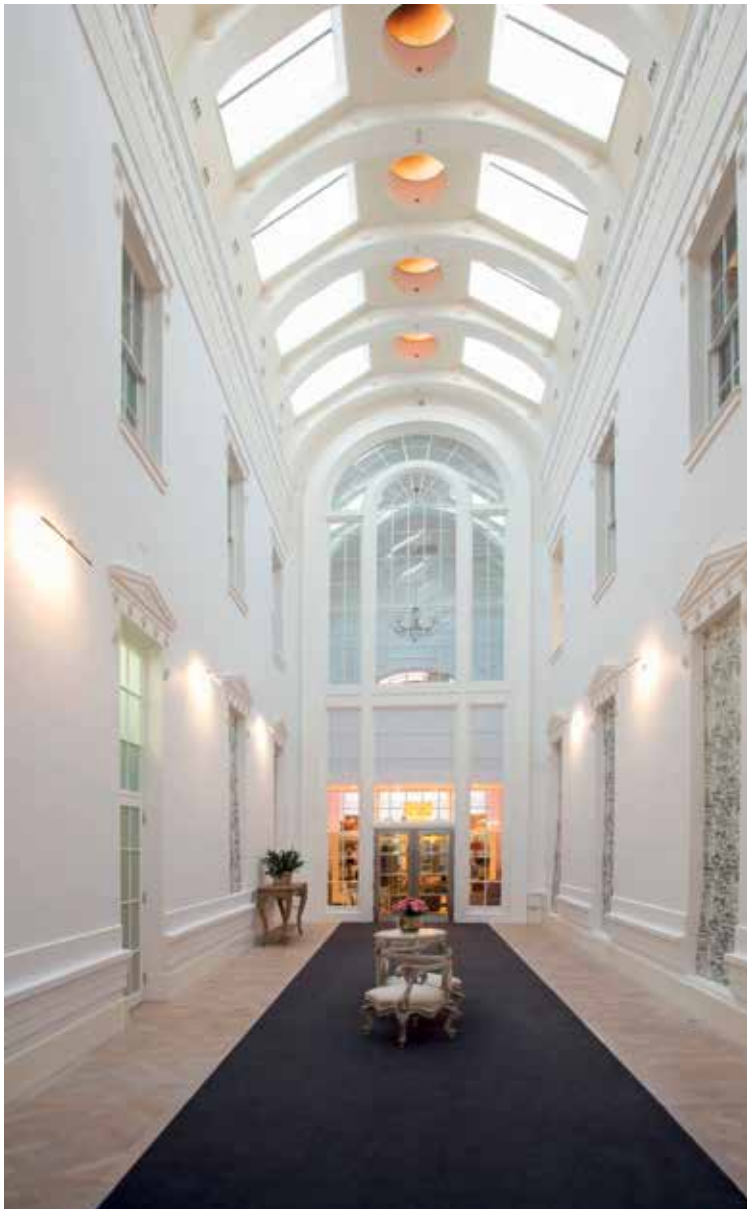
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Above: Soho House Amsterdam. After opening its original London club in 1995, the company has branched out, with clubs in cities including Amsterdam, Berlin, Istanbul, Chicago, and Mumbai.

Left and below: Grace Belgravia, a women-only private health and wellness club was designed by RHE Studio. Aside from a lounge and restaurant it also features a gym, spa, and medical facilities.



Studio.