

URBAN ESCAPE

CONVERTING AN OLD FIRE STATION
INTO A BOUTIQUE HOTEL DESTINATION SPA

A Chihuly sculpture cascades in a flow of light from the high ceiling down through the center to the reception area.

AN OLD WORLD OASIS IN THE HEART OF DOWNTOWN

By Michael Effler

A destination spa needs a great location with several attractive elements to supply a multitude of guests.

When the Tacoma, WA downtown waterfront was redeveloped, it sparked a renaissance anchored by a convention center, a light rail station, railroad museum, art galleries and a world-class glass museum. With a high traffic restaurant and nightclub row, highway access close by, and plenty of parking for locals, this location was prime for a spa and wellness center. Rarely do so many features come together in one location.

A major hotelier had renovated the old firehouse, an architectural gem with two floors, into a boutique hotel. While the upstairs hotel established itself as a downtown fixture, the cavernous downstairs with its separate entrance sat waiting for a good use that made sense. A spa or wellness center was a perfect fit, to transform the space from a lofty basement into a high concept city destination.

The hotel developers brought in industry leaders, the International Design Concepts team. They asked them to design and develop a med and day spa. It was the first multi-use spa in the nation to share space with a hotel in that chain.

Maximizing space to add services (and revenue)

“It was a stately building with a European flavor, with just dirt on the floor,” said Michael Effler, Managing Director of International Design Concepts. “The developers planned on renovating that one level. But we looked up at these huge high ceilings and saw an opportunity. We said, we can put a mezzanine up there.”

City code allowed for a second story to be built between the existing floor and ceiling, but by adding only eight inches total vertical space.

Since cutting into the hotel above was out of the question, the IDC team figured out how to go down. They proposed lowering the ground level inside the walls by almost a foot, with a special low-profile concrete technique to create an ultra-thin floor. As a result, they were able to fit a partial mezzanine, expanding the space from about 6,500 square feet to just under 10,000.

Part of what made the transformation possible, said Michael, was the fact that the owners brought in IDC early in the construction process. With control of every aspect of the facility, from the location of interior walls to plumbing and wiring, the IDC team could create a masterful spa space, literally from the ground up.

*Scrolled ironwork details
recreate a village ambiance*



VIP
Couple's
Suites



A European village within a courtyard

In addition to a med spa, the owners were visionary in that they wanted a memorable theme, something to captivate their guests' attention. They wanted that "wow" factor to hold them in its magic throughout their entire visit. IDC researched the architecture of Brittany seaside villages, confident that the old world feel of the building could be extended to really capture the imagination.

When guests step through the doorways of the spa's traditional brick exterior, or descend the staircase or elevator from the hotel lobby, they are surprised to find themselves in the heart of a European village. Even though it's all located inside the building, the environment feels like outside.

Guests are greeted with a delightful cobblestone street lit by streetlamps. The path meanders to the central reception area where an open well stretches up through the mezzanine floor all the way to the original ceiling. The walls, fashioned with faux aged brick and stone, hold windows and awning-covered doorways. Wrought iron railings surround a balcony. Flower boxes adorn some of the second-story rooflines.

A Chihuly sculpture cascades in a flow of light from the high ceiling down through the center to the reception area. A playful row of faux village 'buildings' house the service areas. Guests follow signs along winding avenues lined with quaint doorways, to the mezzanine, which looks out onto the 'street' below through windows lined with iron-hinged shutters.

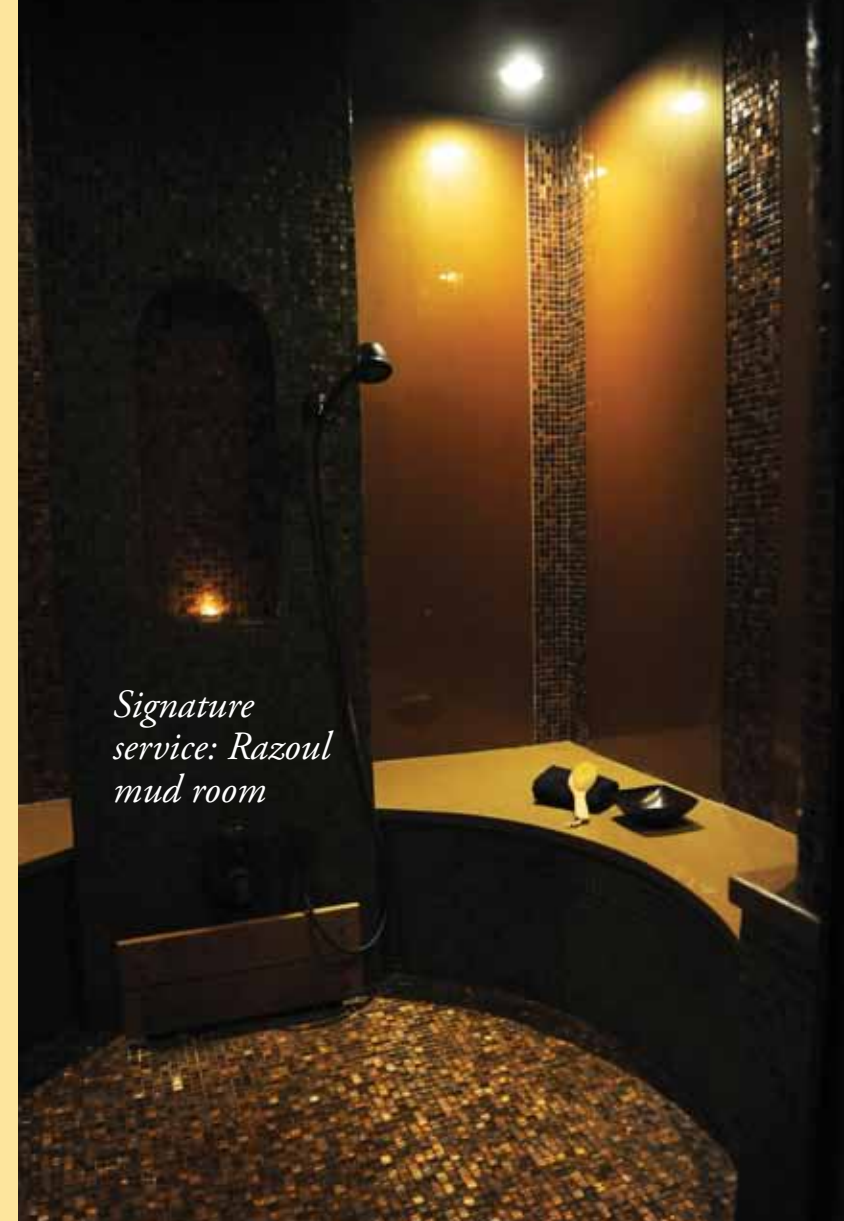
Old world-services and new

Although the location was a big plus, another key to continuing success was creating as many guest approaches as possible, to bring in even those who might not consider visiting a day spa. A separate full-service barbershop, for example, helped introduce male guests to the spa experience.

Working with the existing amenities of the hotel, the IDC team created a range of services rivaling those found in spas nearly ten times as large, including:

Men's tonsorial: old-fashioned barber parlor turns a shave and a haircut into an old-world experience.

Ladies full-service finishing salon: includes manicure, pedicure, complete hair, chemical services, make-up bar.



Signature service: Razoul mud room

Signature Service: The IDC team added a Razoul mud room, where guests enjoy this soothing service in a specially designed, tiled wet area.

VIP Couple's Suites amenities include side-by-side treatment beds, along with private bath, fireplace, and even a double tub.

Pool access: With the hotel's pool, sauna, and steam room already located in the lower portion of the building, the spa not only gained those services, but also gained significant walk-through traffic. Guests walk past the spa area to the pool, enticing them to make an appointment.

Yoga: For guests who might not venture downstairs, adding yoga classes upstairs gave the hotel a chance to expose its full line of services.

Med-spa services designed for minimally invasive procedures, accessible from both the hotel lobby and the spa.

Award-winning advice

The spa won many awards when it opened, including Best Places Northwest. The current owners of Clara's Spa Salon & Studios are licensed professionals committed to providing



Full-service finishing salon and make-up

healing, wellness, couture and cutting edge techniques with upscale hospitality. They offer many personalized skin and body care programs to substantially improve appearance, skin texture and general well being.

Not every spa can find a location next door to a convention center and a light rail station. Yet every location has its own benefits. Any spa has the unique potential to attract certain groups of clientele. What's important is to identify those groups and their patterns of activity, then build a range of services to fill gaps in the market.

If you're developing a day, medical or destination spa in these economic times, **don't copy others or compete with them.** Instead, take the lead with originality -- so you're marketing in a league of your own.

Photos by Erin Lund: www.berrylanephotography.com

For more information on Clara's Spa: www.clarasspa.com



Michael Effler is the founder of International Design Concepts, an industry-leading spa design firm. Michael shares his expertise with clients and audiences in Canada, the US, and Europe. With more than 25 years' experience, IDC is known for cutting-edge design and development of day, medical, hotel and resort spas.