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CANADIAN INTERIORS

Western comfort

A hotel in Saskatoon

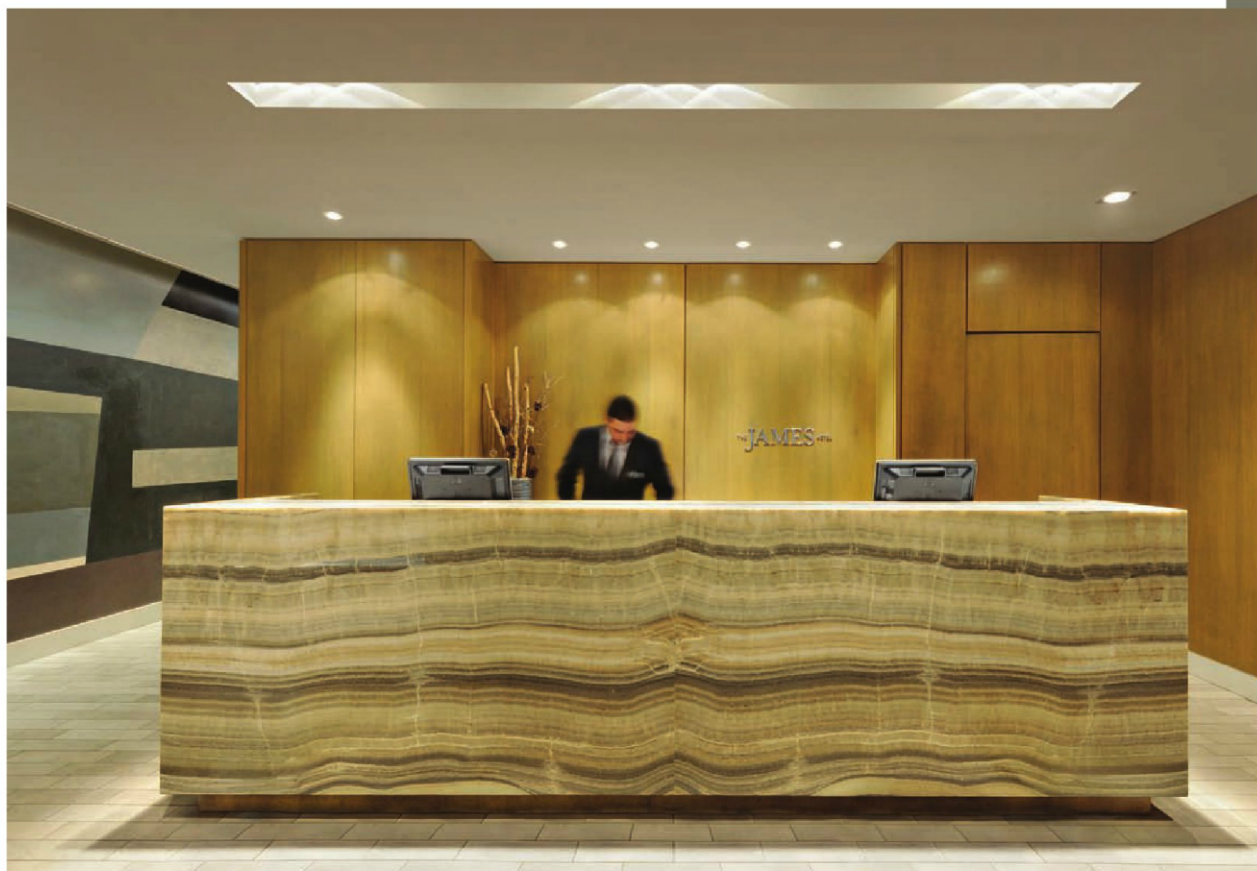
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To transform a '60s apartment building in Saskatoon into the upscale James Hotel, Calgary-based architect/designer Michael Shugarman looked to the light and landscape of the prairie.

—By Leslie C. Smith

I wish I had a river The reception desk is a plain, oblong slab of onyx, horizontally striated like the riverbank outside. Shugarman himself created the large mural at left; its jagged chunks of blue, green, grey and white represent "large sheets of ice floating down the river."



If, in the past, Midwestern Canada had reason to complain of being ignored by the rest of Canada and particularly the fat cats back east, the issue has neatly resolved itself. Thanks to a super-abundance of natural materials – oil, gas and potash – the area is white-hot. Businesspeople of all stripes are now flocking to the prairies like a massive gaggle of Canada geese descending on Diefenbaker Lake in the springtime.

Once there, new investors and entrepreneurs can experience culture shock. Such friendly people! A landscape so alien and unrelentingly immense! The hotels so (we hate to be insufferably superior but) stuffy and old-fashioned! Enter Michael

Shugarman, the born-and-raised prairie boy who heads up Calgary's Shugarman Architecture + Design. His most recent project, retrofitting a 10-storey, 1960s vintage apartment building in Saskatoon and turning it into an upscale boutique apartment-hotel, addressed all three cultural concerns in a single swipe.

Shugarman felt the city offered no accommodations with "an elegant, luxurious, yet contemporary feel." Traditional CP-style hotels in the region still tend towards the type of dark, deluxe dressings that were in vogue among the Victorians. Saskatoon's new James Hotel, however, features clean lines and a lightened palette, presenting a refreshing

face to visitors used to the modern vernacular.

Even more important, both for out-of-towners and city dwellers that make their home at the hotel or utilize its publicly accessed areas, is the sense of being welcome. As Shugarman puts it: "One of the things that the West has is a very inclusive sense of living. In many parts of the world, luxury is exclusive – we wanted luxury that was inclusive. I think the best thing about the James is that it's like a relaxed, inviting club that anyone can join."

Situated in the heart of the city, right on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River, the hotel also offered the designer a chance to showcase the region's idiosyncratic artistry,

one based (as so much Canadian art is) on the allure of the landscape. An artist himself, the Edmonton-born Shugarman has made a personal study of the prairie aesthetic, and has attempted to relate it to his choices for the hotel's interiors.

"There's a quality of light that is very different here," he says. "The dryness of the air makes the light sharper and it casts stronger shadows." The light itself is given shape by these shadows, in much the same way as a strong spotlight becomes more noticeable when creating dramatic shadow play against a stage flat. Then too, "the flatness of the landscape really sets any object out and apart. There's such strong



Shadows and light Throughout the hotel, Shugarman has stressed a muted colour palette: soft gold and brown, pale blue and grey, punctuated with strong patches of white. A group of tall, thin louvers marks the lobby's division from the lounge (above left and above right) and bar (opposite); mimicking the strong light and shadows of the Midwest, they present two faces: dark walnut contrasting with white lacquer. An onyx rectangle forms the large fireplace, echoing the

reception desk. In the guest bedrooms (such as the one at left), local artwork was specifically selected to blend in with the "prairie in early twilight" colour scheme.

horizontals and, when they're there at all, strong verticals. A barn or grain elevator looks almost like a child would draw it, delineated in very simple terms."

And so the hotel lobby features wooden wall panelling of sparse detail, save for the vertical grain that runs floor to ceiling. The reception desk is a plain, oblong slab of onyx, horizontally striated like the riverbank itself outside. Another onyx rectangle (and stylized reference to the South Saskatoon) forms the lounge fireplace, where a low gas flame is underlined by a smooth row of river stones. And marking the lobby's division from the main-floor lounge and bar is a grouping of tall, thin louvers that

present two faces: the shadow of dark walnut contrasting with the light of white lacquer.

Throughout the hotel, Shugarman has stressed a muted colour palette (soft gold and brown, pale blue and grey, punctuated with strong patches of white) reflective of the surrounding landscape: wheat and earth to the horizon, then an amazing azure canopy that can, at the same time, be darkened with thunderclouds over here, white with billowy cumuli over there. Even his choice of local artwork dotting the hallways and guest rooms features the same chromatic scheme. The pieces also reference Saskatchewan artists' mid-20th-century love affair with abstraction, as typified by the Emma Lake

Workshops and the Regina Five. Shugarman himself, inspired by Marion Nicoll's paintings from the '50s and '60s, created the huge, 45-by-8-foot mural that stretches down one wall of the lobby and wraps around into the bar. The work's jagged chunks of blue, green, grey and white represent "large sheets of ice floating down the river, colliding with each other, catching the winter light."

He designed the hotel furnishings too, which were produced by local manufacturers. The James's 59 rooms and single penthouse come quality-equipped with couches covered in mohair, butternut armchairs and solid walnut wall units.

Shugarman is perhaps proudest of the way these

rooms manage to express the mood of early evening light on the prairies: "There's a beautiful, mellow softness that goes from very blue to gorgeous sunset to steely grey twilight, especially in the wintertime. For the bedrooms in particular, I wanted guests to feel enveloped, wrapped up in this soft grey evening sky." ❧