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BRIAN WILLIAMS

Swire Hotels may seem to have boldly appeared out of nowhere, with its Opposite House and Upper House hotels in China, but its team is vastly experienced under the steer of managing director Brian Williams. April Hutchinson meets the man who has more plans in the pipeline

HOW DID SWIRE HOTELS COME ABOUT?

We are part of John Swire & Sons, a huge global company including Swire Pacific, one of Hong Kong's leading businesses with diverse interests predominantly in the Greater China region. Swire Pacific also includes Cathay Pacific and has a major interest in hotels such as the Mandarin Orientals in Miami and Hong Kong. So making the move into developing our own hotels and hospitality management seemed the logical decision.

WHAT'S IN THE PORTFOLIO NOW?

Opposite House Beijing marked our debut in time for the Olympics and this was quickly followed by Upper House in Hong Kong (*pictured*). Shanghai would be our next likely location for a "house" within the next year or so, but these are as far removed from being chain hotels as you can imagine. We also have the East brand developing – our philosophy there is to provide a stylish five-star business hotel at a good price, and our first one opened in January in Hong Kong.

HAVE THE HOTELS BEEN POPULAR SO FAR?

We have been pleasantly surprised by their reception. Our first East has seen good occupancy since opening. It's not in the usual hotel districts of Hong Kong, but has caught the interest of a young local crowd, given its location in Island East, a new mixed-use district in Hong Kong developed by Swire. The 345-room East hotel has the rooftop harbour-view bar Sugar, with cocktails, international tapas bar menu and DJs. Upper House and Opposite House both created such a buzz in their destinations, as there was nothing else really like them.

IS THERE ANY CROSSOVER OR WILL ALL THE BRANDS BE DISTINCT?

The "houses" will each be uniquely designed. But across all our hotels, the latest technology and hospitality concepts will be employed, such as paperless check-in which is both environmentally friendly and does away with the traditional check-in desks.

AND WHAT ABOUT IN THE UK?

We feel there is a gap for Swire to step into with affordable and stylish hotels in period buildings in secondary and tertiary locations and we have acquired buildings in Exeter, Cheltenham, Bristol and Brighton. Pricing would be around the £120 mark per room. The hotels will have spas, cosy fireplaces, open kitchens and menus inspired by local produce.

SO HAVE YOU BEEN SHOPPING FOR PROPERTY ACROSS THE UK?

Yes, it's been exciting! There are so many fantastic buildings and locations. The recession has sadly left many wonderful buildings empty, but this becomes an opportunity for us. Cheltenham will be a prototype – there are many businesses based there and it's on the doorstep of the Cotswolds. We aim to get involved with the local arts scene and make the hotel a part of the social fabric of the area. (swirehotels.com)

