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firm: slade architecture site: new york

beyond the velvet rope

The first big snowstorm of 2010 hit New York just as fashion week got under way. But that didn't stop W Hotels Worldwide's VIP lounge from being built at breakneck speed inside the tents set up in Bryant Park. The installation, designed by Slade Architecture and constructed in Ohio, was packed into a tractor-trailer a day and a half before the shows opened and encountered so many delays, due to unplowed interstates, that the production team had a mere seven hours to put everything together. True to the concept of guerrilla design, the lounge literally popped up out of nowhere.

Officially known as the W Arrivals Lounge, the aviation-inspired installation was definitely the most stylish site-specific environment to set the glamour pack atwitter since Calvin Klein held its 40th-anniversary party on the High Line, an elevated former railway, in 2008. That piece of brand theater, masterminded by *Interior Design* Hall of Fame member John Pawson, involved a garden of rose bushes and a light sculpture by James Turrell—costing \$3 million.



During February's fashion week, gelled fluorescents illuminated the entry tunnel at the W Arrivals Lounge.

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and lasting for just one night. By contrast, Hayes and James Slade's structure, built on a budget as tight as the deadline, had to remain intact to convey the W brand for eight frenetic days, as a constant stream of designers, models, photographers, editors, musicians, and movie stars arrived to sip cocktails, hear the DJ sets, and enjoy one another's high-profile company. Iman, Heidi Klum, and Michael Kors were frequent guests.

W's design team conceived the

sunny yellow, soft lavender, and silver. On a scrim, cloud graphics floated in a bright blue sky. On the walls underneath, glossy white plastic laminate gave the effect of an airplane's fuselage.

Visual pun aside, the conveyor-belt banquettes helped maximize the tight footprint of only 450 square feet. "To differentiate the zones without compartmentalizing them, we came to this idea of weaving the banquettes around to define pools of space," James Slade

says. One banquette virtually encircled a corner, transforming it into a sitting area for the most VIP of the VIPs—elevated, for further emphasis, on a 15-inch-high platform.

This ultraexclusive corner was directly to the left when arrivals emerged from the entry tunnel. Offering a literal and figurative transition zone between the surrounding tents and the inner sanctum, this chartreuse-lit passageway bent at a 45-degree angle to obstruct the view ahead. ➤

Opposite, from top: Clad in polished and satin aluminum laminate, a custom door pulled back to reveal the lounge. Model Heidi Klum was one of the many celebrity visitors over an eight-day period.

From top: LCD monitors listed recently opened and upcoming W properties. Custom acrylic-topped tables accompanied banquettes upholstered in vinyl and velvet.



admirably simple airport concept. "It really had to be clear," Hayes Slade says. "It wasn't going to have an opportunity to evolve over an extended period of time. You had to experience it, get it, like it. With immediacy." So she and her husband played off multiple travel references. Digital screens reinvented the arrivals board, with the opening dates and locations of 30-plus W hotels being launched around the world. Metallic banquettes, snaking around the perimeter of the space, brought to mind a luggage carousel. Highlighting the effect, suitcases placed at intervals on the seats displayed products related to specific W properties from Koh Samui in Thailand to Leicester Square in London. And the whole space shimmered in a palette of



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From top: W Hotels Worldwide design director Gray Shealy and vice president of design Ted Jacobs flanked Slade Architecture's James and Hayes Slade. Acrylic tops allowed faux suitcases to display W-related products while serving as a place to rest a drink.



The suspense ended when the main seating area, the bar, and the DJ booth appeared straight ahead.

Given the amount of foot traffic the lounge would get, the Slades de-emphasized the floor by opting for simple black plastic laminate. "The rest of the surfaces were both durable and luxurious," Hayes Slade says. To create a statement, the banquettes combined reflective silver vinyl on the seats with silver-gray velvet on the backs. Guests could set their drinks down either on the serpentine shelves behind each banquette or on the clear acrylic tops of the product-display suitcases.

Fashion equals aspiration, which is why the New York shows are the ideal context for experiential branding. W Hotels's vice president of design, Ted Jacobs, asked what he thought of the Arrivals Lounge, declared that the ultimate test of success was "the desire of so many to see and be seen there." In such a highly mediated environment, that also meant they'd be seen in print and on the Internet. Ditto for the walls' tiny W logos. Made from a crystal-composite film, they were sure to pop in the flash of a camera. —Heather Hodson

FROM FRONT ROSCO LABORATORIES: COVE LIGHTING (ENTRY). CHEMETAL: DOOR SURFACING. WILSONART INTERNATIONAL: WALL SURFACING, FLOORING (ENTRY, LOUNGE). DURALEE FABRICS: BANQUETTE SEAT UPHOLSTERY (LOUNGE). VALLEY FORGE FABRICS: BANQUETTE BACK FABRIC. 3FORM: EMBOSSED LOGO MATERIAL. THROUGHOUT LATITUDE 41 CREATIVE: GENERAL CONTRACTOR.



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