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A cut above

Urban Resort Concepts CEO Markus Engel on the hotel management company's mission to deliver service beyond expectations



That the international hotel brands have more than one property in Shanghai speaks volumes about this Chinese city's reputation as one of the world's top destinations. From the Ritz-Carlton, the Radisson and Shangri-La to Sheraton and the Four Seasons, the most recognisable signatures of the hospitality world have added their imprint to the city's already stunning skyline, each offering its promise of excellence in hospitality. Copping up among them are boutique hotels — some independent, appealing to the budget traveller and some a chic brand of highly stylised lodgings and positions of individual attention with prices to match.

These names, big and small, have found their place in Shanghai's fiercely competitive hospitality market. Presumably, it is a tough environment for a new player, yet the relatively young Urban Resort Concepts (URC) has managed to make waves in it. Its inaugural property, The PuLi Hotel and Spa, has won popular acclaim since opening its doors in September 2009. That same year, China's Travel and Meeting Industry Awards by *Travel Weekly China* named it the Best New Hotel in China. By 2011, trend-forward publications such as *Wallpaper* magazine and *Condé Nast Traveler* had listed PuLi as one of their top 100 hotels in the world and global luxury purveyors such as LVMH and Richemont had affixed the establishment on their digital Rolodexes as the place to host and entertain their guests and business partners when in Shanghai. Today, PuLi is a member of The Leading Hotels of the World and Design Hotels.

Located in the heart of Shanghai within JingAn District between the famous NanJing West Road and

to another level. There is 24-hour check-in and check-out service and unlimited complimentary laundry and pressing throughout your stay. You'll also have a daily allowance starting at RMB388 (RM193) at the hotel's Long Bar without restrictions to time and cocktail selections. Your room comes with a personalised in-room mini-bar prepared by your GuanJia, also commonly known as butlers. He will stock it with your preferred alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages and snacks. There'll be a daily in-room aperitif prepared and served by your GuanJia, luxe bathroom amenities, priority bookings at Anantara Spa, the hotel's Jing'An Restaurant and Long Bar and complimentary use of the boardroom. Your GuanJia will help organise your schedule, from your beverage wake-up service to transport and dining arrangements around the city, and take care of such things as minor garment repairs, IT assistance, shoeshine and personalised cigar service. As the folks at PuLi put it, he is your "soulmate" during your stay.

Sound amazing? Well, this is just the beginning for URC. In two months, the PuYu Hotel and Spa opens in Wuhan, followed by The PuSen Forest Retreat and Spa in Shaoxing and The SenRong Resort and Residences in Zhuji. Each of these hotels will be tailored to express the culture and nuances of its resident city or country.

"The product evolution of URC has been a process that's been breeding in my mind for a long, long time. We're not a design or boutique hotel — that was clear in my mind all this time. Certainly, aspirationally, we want to be a Dorchester in London because we want to create a very polished service and guest experience and package it in an attractive, contemporary

Great expectations

In 2007, four disillusioned hoteliers decided the time was right to create a hotel management company that dared to be different. Thus was born Urban Resort Concepts. Jacqueline Toyad learns more about the game changer from CEO Markus Engel at The PuLi Hotel and Spa, a URC establishment that has taken the Shanghai hospitality industry by storm.

YanAn Middle Road, the 26-floor hotel is close to some of Shanghai's best business, shopping, sightseeing and entertainment areas. Where most luxury resorts and hotels are concerned, there is the predictability of opulent décor from marble inlays to gold taps. At PuLi, the décor is defined by a well-balanced marriage of contemporary styling and references to Shanghai's history and culture. Working on a base of dark wood and stone, most of the details were handcrafted, tailored for PuLi. The result is an amazingly peaceful and luxurious resort atmosphere, a place to get away from it all, which lies just beyond the hidden driveway.

With a choice of 193 rooms and 36 suites measuring anywhere between 45 to 130 sq m, PuLi offers the standard facilities available in five-star hotels as well as extras such as Bose wave music systems and MP3 docking ports, GSM portable phones with dual SIM card slots and city-wide coverage, DVD players, Nespresso machines, complimentary Internet access and so on.

Take a room on the Club Floor and service steps up

and intelligent shell. We are design-led and we are service-driven," says Markus Engel, chief executive of URC and one of its four co-founders.

"At the core of running a hotel is a craft, like going to Jermyn Street in London and getting a suit or a pair of shoes made. It takes a lot of components, including skill and experience, training and material to get the suit or shoes right. I believe it is the same formula for hotels. It is, of course, a business, but it is the craft that results in a successful business."

It takes one stay at PuLi to be able to grasp exactly what Engel is talking about, and this is my second. And while I may not like to gush, in this instance I can't help it. The service on both visits was efficient and remarkably intuitive, the latter being one of Engel's favourite keywords.

We are having a chat in the library, right beside the main lobby. It's a cosy room with bookshelves 5m high and a collection of more than 2,500 books and newspapers in various languages. A roaring fireplace adds to the ambience, a welcome element on the chilly wintry morning.





The PuLi Hotel and Spa's main lobby with a 32m solid teak bar that is used as reception desk, concierge as well as bar (called Long Bar). The use of materials associated with Shanghai architecture such as dark local timber, cast bronze, air dried clay tiles and local flamed and handmade stone echoes throughout the hotel.

Engel is the perfect host, making sure everyone has his beverage of choice before our conversation begins. As the prerequisite for anyone in the hotel industry, he is impeccably groomed, smart from head to toe. He is a great conversationalist — pick any topic, from baroque music to Malaysian politics, and he has some prized quip or quote on it. He is witty, warm and curious about the nature of people and things. It is easy to see how he has managed to thrive in the hospitality industry over the past two decades, including in senior management positions at such famous hotels as London's The Dorchester, The Datai Langkawi, The Peninsula Hotels in Beijing and Chicago as well as Raffles and Oberoi Hotels & Resorts.

Born in Germany to parents of French and German descent, Engel describes his upbringing as “non eventful” with early plans of studying political science and journalism. Plans went awry when he took a bartending job at a hotel to make money to travel and study — he fell in love with the industry and studied hospitality instead.

Engel's passion for the industry is apparent. On his travels — be it with his paramour of more than 20 years and their two daughters or on work — he keeps a notebook to jot down clever ideas. “Not to copy,” he says matter-of-factly, “but to try and understand why this was done and that it is a clever idea.”

It is this passion and that of the like-minded colleagues he befriended over the years that led to the founding of URC in 2007. Chief operating officer John Laing has 25 years of experience in luxury hospitality and was responsible for the opening of five landmark GHM hotels, including The Nam Hai, Hoi An in Vietnam, The Setai in Miami and The Lalu, Sun Moon Lake in Taiwan. Bernd Koehn, senior vice-president of operations, previously worked for Raffles International,

Nobody comes back to the hotel because of design. They come for the first time to have a look, but they'll never come back if the guest experience was not right.

The Peninsula Group and Oberoi Hotels & Resorts and is now in charge of the execution of technical services and operations planning at URC. The fourth co-founder, Patrick Chen, is vice-president of development in China.

Together, they set out to introduce a hospitality concept that banks on contextual design and execution. Engel is clear on the fact that they do not envision themselves as pioneers but rather as hoteliers using their years of experience in luxury hospitality to create a near-perfect product.

“It sounds benign and stereotypical, but we've all become accustomed to this deterioration in service in most aspects of the service industry. To me, it's very important that we uphold the highest possible standard of service and guest experience. That has always been the key and that alone ensures that we are different from our competitors,” Engel explains.

“Urban Resort Concepts is fundamentally four disillusioned hoteliers who decided that the time was right to create a hotel management company that was embracing much more actively and intelligently, to some extent, the very distinct changes that were occurring in consumer behaviour some 10 years ago. Take the Four Seasons hotel. You'll find a lot of very distinguishing features that will make the brand very recognisable whether you're in Los Angeles or Rome or Tokyo. And there will always be an audience for it, who find reassurance in that consistency, continuity and recognisable feature of a particular brand and that audience will continue to exist. But there is an ever-increasing number of people who say that is exactly what they don't want when they come to a place like Shanghai, Tokyo or Paris. They think, ‘I want to be in a Parisian or Shanghai hotel. I want to touch the environment. I want my

hotel to not only be my home for two nights, but also my facilitator for me to experience an environment more intimately.’”

Based on what is offered at PuLi, design is an obvious feature that will run through URC's upcoming host of resorts, but Engel says that makes up only 30% of the rates.

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He spares me the well-practised spiel of hoteliers with keywords such as exceeding expectations or unparalleled service. Instead, he offers: “I'll be delighted if I meet expectations — people who come here tend to have high expectations. I hope the guest experience is intuitive and hassle free. We fail regularly as every business does, but we have a 43% repeat guest ratio at PuLi, which is certainly the highest I've ever come across in my career, and I think it may well be one of the highest in Shanghai.”

Engel and his team are in the midst of exporting the URC brand of hospitality to Kuala Lumpur. The project is The RuMa Hotel and Residences, a multi-use development in Jalan Kia Peng by luxury lifestyle property developer Ireka Corp Bhd.

Engel and Laing had spent some time in Malaysia when both were working on The Datai in Langkawi and are hence familiar with the country, the mix of its cultures and the environment. Engel is excited as he has seen the Jalan Kia Peng site in the heart of Kuala Lumpur's Golden Triangle and believes it is the perfect setting for the kind of resort experience that is in line with URC's philosophy.

It is fairly early in conception; there's not even a sketch. Off the official fact sheet, RuMa will be a

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Computer renderings of the The RuMa Hotel and Residences, the completion of which is expected in 2017. RuMa's decor and services will be inspired by Malaysian heritage repackaged for the 21st century.



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40-storey complex with the hotel taking the 6th to 18th floors and serviced residences from the 19th to 37th floors. Rooms range from deluxe (463 sq m) to various sized suites (1,056 sq ft for the main presidential suite). Completion is expected in 2017. Right now, Engel travels back and forth with his team in building a concept for RuMa.

He says, "To create any hotel, you need a very strong collaborative process with the developer. To create a hotel like one of ours, you need to have a near-intimate relationship with the developer because it is an intensive process of actually tailormaking a hotel. We don't work off a formula. There is no manual, no standards per se that tell you this is what we need to build, so build it and we'll run it. Every aspect of the hotel is bespoke, detailed and tailor-made. And for us, it's important that we see eye to eye with the developer, that we collectively draw from its experience, its local knowledge, its expertise and that there is a very strong cross-fertilisation in the development of the hotel."

All Engel would disclose is that this forthcoming establishment will draw inspiration from KL and its people. I hear hints of pewter, timber and cane, but no more.

"We go through a long process of determining and establishing the potential angles and components that can embellish, contribute and add to the overall hotel concept. And then, it's really a process of talking to our partners and establishing a footing and foundations from which we can start exploring various design directions, product directions and configurations. A lot of it is testing and trying, and researching; if we say contextual, we

apply this as a reference point and very often we apply it in a non-obvious way. We apply it through materials, shapes and textures; through lighting and various different things, but never obvious. We go through a process of exploration and then I think once the direction is firm up, we start looking for the best consultants to work with on implementing that strategy," he says.

Discussions right now involve a debate on sinks in RuMa's bathrooms. Two standalone washbasins or two sinks together in one piece of furniture? How many inches apart?

Engel says he and his partners are not interested in building a massive hospitality empire. The intent behind URC was, and always will be, to bring something interesting and of great quality to the market. Of course, as a business, growth and profit feature prominently on the agenda, but the progress and development of their hospitality management company will be organic.

"We're not interested in having 280 hotels open; we're not opening every two weeks. We want to have a collection of 15 to 20 hotels in some key gateways and we want our hotels to be the best in class, the best in locale. If we're able to achieve these things in even up to 15 instances, I'd be a very happy man," Engel smiles.

"What we've done here and what we're doing in the upcoming properties is being recognised as something that is potentially different. If that influences other people in the industry, fantastic. If it doesn't, I'm not going to lose any sleep over it. My obligation is to the stakeholders, to the owners, to myself — to be able to come into a hotel that I am proud of and say proudly to my daughters, 'Daddy did this!'"