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sexyback

555 International brings sexy back to the strip with the Playboy Club in Las Vegas



romeo, romeo
work hard, play hard
the zhou b center
taking the lead



The rooftop of the nightclub, Moon with a view of the strip.



SEXY BACK

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SINCE 1988, WHEN the last American Playboy bunnies retired their ears, devotees have pined for the return of Hugh Hefner's legendary institution. At its zenith in the 1960s, the Playboy Club stood as the reigning symbol of sex and sophistication—and a confirmation that those two ideals weren't necessarily mutually exclusive. For many, the demise of the Playboy Club, which had by then established a worldwide presence, signaled the end of an era.



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The concept of being able to eat, lounge and dance within three venues all linked together as one is evident with this link to the Playboy from Moon. The floor tiles contain LED lights which follow you throughout the entire nightclub floor.

So when entertainment partnership the Nine Group tapped Chicago-based 555 International to design the Playboy Club at the Palms Casino Resort in Las Vegas—and thereby help usher in a new era—the design, development and manufacturing company turned to the annals of the iconic brand's history. 555's founding partner and president, James Geier, and Karen Herold, partner and director of design, later emerged with three words—luxury, playfulness and exuberance—that fueled every subsequent design decision.

The Playboy Club is one of three 555-designed venues—each 12,000 square feet, and connected by way of glass-and-mirror escalators—in the Palms' new Fantasy Tower, developed in partnership between the Palms, Playboy Enterprises and the Nine Group. The restaurant Nove Italiano—with its hand-carved Louis chairs, Swarovski crystal chandeliers equipped with color-changing LED lights, and 12-foot topiary sculptures in the form of shapely nudes—translates sixteenth century idioms into new millennial language. Bathed in shades of purple, every corner of the restaurant suggests royal grandeur, a stark contrast to the dance club two floors up: Moon, whose fully retractable roof offers unobstructed

views of the nighttime skies, is high technology to Nove's High Renaissance vibe.

But it's the Playboy Club that delivers most literally against the tower's name: It was designed to be a fantasyland for the wealthy and those who would be wealthy. "[The Playboy Club] transports people to a place they might not be able to get to every day," says Geier, "so the regular guy can feel like a part of Hef's world. Not everyone can live this lifestyle, but people can buy a piece of it for the night." (Or, in some cases, steal a piece. At the club's October 2006 launch, many of the "bunny head" tufting buttons on entryway walls were appropriated for personal use until 555 attached them permanently.)

Just off the elevator, the Diamond Bar comes into full view. Its back wall is covered with 10,000 paperweight-sized, diamond-cut crystals, each sitting in a gem-stone setting. Some of these crystals are reversed in their settings to create the word, "Playboy," whose letters glimmer in and out of view from the gaming room. In that high-rolling space, surfaces are swathed in luxuriant materials: embossed leather seating, curtains of beaded lace, and overhead, black Baccarat crystal chandeliers designed by Philippe Starck.



The Playboy casino area contains black Baccarat chandeliers designed by Philippe Starck. Couches are custom made with embossed Playboy emblems manufactured by Koch Smith of Chicago. Positioned along the back wall of the gaming area, 60 plasma screens flip through Playboy's archived material, from stills to video footage.



Above: The intimately scaled VIP room exudes a more male energy, inspired as it was by old-fashioned, gentleman's smoking rooms. Throwing light onto the parquet floors—composed of hand-scraped, solid walnut planks—a fireplace, clad in crocodile-embossed leather, extends nearly 10 feet across the room.

Below: The staircase leading to the rooftop deck of Moon have individual controlled color changing LED acrylic tips on the railing. The columns and ceiling of the mezzanine are covered with gun metal iridescent marble mosaics.



The intimately scaled VIP room exudes a more male energy, inspired as it was by old-fashioned, gentleman's smoking rooms. Throwing light onto the parquet floors—composed of hand-scraped, solid walnut planks—a fireplace, clad in crocodile-embossed leather, extends nearly 10 feet across the room. And if they could, four zebra skin chairs would throw off the gunpowder whiff of the nineteenth century safari hunt they evoke.

The key to this design—the thing that saves the club from devolving into garish pageantry, which Vegas has in surfeit already—is that even as 555 delivers pure opulence, Geier and Herold exercise a great deal of restraint. Where over-the-top luxury is fully expressed, it's tempered by the designers' subtle touch. Few guests, for instance, are likely to discern the details of the rhinestone mosaic on the gaming room's vaulted ceiling. But no one could fail to notice the glints



of shimmering, refracted light the mosaic throws throughout the room. And that, in a way, is the point. 555 undertook to design a space whose refined details, including those that aren't overtly displayed, are always felt on a visceral level.

Other elements beg to be ogled. Positioned along the back wall of the gaming area, 60 plasma screens flip through Playboy's archived material, from stills to video footage. Laws prohibit the existence of gaming and nudity in the same area. But where there's a law, there's a loophole. 555 found theirs in the bathrooms, whose walls emerged as a perfectly legal showcase for a custom collage of 333 centerfold images, "the greatest of all time," says Geier, who knows so well because he selected them himself.

That collage, coated in a Bedazzled overlay, is downright monastic by comparison to the stall doors. The front of each features nearly full-sized

photographs of current Playboy models, who posed nude for legendary Playboy photographer Army Freytag. In an appropriately saucy gesture, the back of each stall door features the rear of the same model who graces the front.

"Playboy is definitely a 'more is more' approach," says Herold. "The more luxury we could pile on, the better. And that's very different from the design of Moon." Make no mistake: The top-floor dance club hardly checks extravagance at the door. Whereas the Playboy Club uses sumptuous materials to engage the senses, Moon does so with layers of technology, including two grandMa lighting consoles that digitally control more than 6,000 channels of light. At times, lighting effects pulse with the music. In other instances, the club's mood shifts, chameleon-like, according to these effects.

The theme of fragmentation pervades the space. In and around the Hex Bar, for instance,

Above: The Diamond Bar comes into full view with its back wall covered with 10,000 paperweight-sized, diamond-cut crystals, each sitting in a gem-stone setting. Some of these crystals are reversed in their settings to create the word, "Playboy," whose letters glimmer in and out of view from the gaming room.



Above: A view to Vegas can be seen through the hanging crystal beads. All of the walls in Moon are covered in stainless steel.

Inset Bottom Right: The VIP room in the Moon nightclub contains acrylic flooring throughout. The entire bar is made of the cracked glass and refracts light from all directions.



The bar in the Playboy lounge has three back lit bunnies with color changing LED lighting that also serve as shelves. The tufting on the bar includes 4500 hundred custom Playboy bunny buttons.

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a collection of mirrored, hexagonal light boxes throw off reflections that seem to extend forever. And illuminated tiles call to mind the shape of broken flagstone slabs. On the dance floor, these tiles—which are actually LED light boxes embedded flush with the floor—form Playboy’s bunny head. Elsewhere, they’re arranged in paths, as if 555 thought to leave breadcrumbs, albeit digital breadcrumbs, for guests.

To fully appreciate the experience of Moon, it helps to understand the way Geier and Herold treat light. For them, that elusive, intangible collection of wavelengths is just another material—as substantial as glass or brick. Essentially, they approach the space as if it were a blank canvas. Moving across its surface like a buoyant kind of paint is the light, which variously ebbs and flows, glows and pulsates.

“In Playboy, what we designed is what you see,” Herold explains. “Here, it’s not so much about what we designed, but that which is reflected off of our design.” Every material was selected according to its reactivity to light.



Rows of fragmented clear beads, which serve as window curtains, are so dense and reflective that they provide a screen onto which moving images can be projected. Even the ceiling, coated with a silver-gray finish, was designed to receive light and moving imagery.

“As an interior designer,” says Herold, “you work with three dimensions. There are walls, ceilings and floors—and then the space stops. What I think we did here, through the light, was to create more than three dimensions. Because the light continually changes as you move through the club, it feels like it never ends. It feels like an endless space.”

It stands to reason that a nightclub inspired by the gravity-free environment of the moon would seem at times to defy the physical laws of the earth. The views afforded by the retractable roof provide a literal connection to the heavens above. But by focusing on the light, by creating reflections of reflections, Geier and Herold have also managed to tap into the cosmos in a more conceptual way: Moon provides a taste—if even for just one night—of the infinite. **i4**