

# Marrying form and function

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Ever dreamt of checking into the perfect hotel? Tyler Brulé visits one in Stockholm that comes close to achieving the title

**D**o you ever have fantasies about being an urban planner? About engineering a better life for your fellow citizens? About creating the perfect city block? If these daydreams are too ambitious, what about packing it all in and creating the perfect hotel? The type of hotel that takes stock of all your international travel triumphs and traumas and repackages them into a beautifully formed property?

Something tells me that Abba's Benny Andersson was probably having such thoughts in his days spent with Sweden's biggest pop culture export.

I know this because Andersson, along with a group of investors, has decided to not only reshape a bit of Stockholm's Söder district but also engineer the type of hotel most frequent travellers dream about checking into.

Regulars to Stockholm will know that the city's district just south of Gamla Stan (old town) has been on the rise for some time. They will also know that there's been a need for someone to come in and shake up the premium end of the hotel market.

For years, The Grand has been the property of choice for heads of state, established pop stars and spoiled Americans. The Lydmar has been home to ad agency executives and foreign fashion photographers. The Esplanade a perfectly placed pied à terre for modernist furniture dealers and well-heeled shoppers from London.

The recently launched Rival hopes to attract all of these – and a few more. Sitting on the east side of a public square off Söder's busy Hornsgatan, the Rival may well be the best attempt at combining clever urban renewal and

inspired inn-keeping that has been undertaken on the far side of the Baltic.

Having a hotel, café, bakery, restaurant, bistro, bar, conference centre and cinema within one complex may not seem particularly ambitious by Times Square or Sol Kerzner standards. But this is Stockholm, and to do anything to excess would unleash all manner of polite protest.

Andersson and partners Christer Sandahl (MyTravel) and Christer Hägglund (Proffice) are clearly not into this for a local vanity play. With 99 rooms, over 700 cinema seats, a fully wired array of conference rooms and a

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heaving restaurant and bar scene, the Rival is anything but boutique.

Walking into the hushed lobby, beside the cinema entrance, you might get a passing wave of design hotel *déjà vu* but this is quickly flushed away by Caroline Eriksson, the hotel's president and general manager. Eriksson speaks of "operations", "function", "attention to detail" and lives up to the latter by fussing at every little quirk as we tour the property. "I'm starting to work my way through sleeping in all 99 rooms," she says with a grin. "I want to make sure every one functions as it should."



Picture perfect: a design by Carouschka Streiffer

With flat-screens by Sony, lacquered orange walls in some rooms, Kasthall rugs and louvred blinds covering the window between bathroom and bedroom, there's plenty that could go wrong. If the partners have paid close attention to their numbers, it could also go very right.

By day, the cinema will act as a jumbo conference room that will clearly sell itself as the city's luxury address in the meeting-and-greeting market. By night, it will continue to be an art house address, showing only progressive films but with a new, improved seat pitch.

Before visiting the hotel, a friend told me about the Rival's exhaustive pillow menu, which features every natural and manmade combination a hypo-





Tommy Bäcklin

rt in the bistro

chondriac could ever hope for. For a country where the national pastime seems to be full-blown discussions about chronic tiredness and ailments, this struck me as a perfect selling feature to pull in local traffic who might want an urban retreat.

And for visitors from overseas? "There are five 'p's we're proud not to have at the hotel," says Eriksson. "No pissoirs, pralines on pillows, porn, popcorn or parapluies in cocktails." Indeed, the pissoirs in the public areas have been replaced by red-ceiling, private, unisex toilets (your own room with toilet and sink) which should be the way forward for loos worldwide. While this is a lovely, if not somewhat standard design feature in the Nordic region, the Rival's best feature is the

thought put into the mini bar. It doesn't score particularly high points because it's well stocked but because someone had the good sense to position it at shoulder level rather than shin height.

The Swedish knack for effortlessly marrying form and function follows throughout the hotel - windows that open, matte oak floors in the rooms, bathroom mirrors that allow guests to tweeze at close range, no nasty bedspreads or sumptuous chocolate brown awnings to block out late afternoon light.

Design low-points are fortunately few but the one key offender impossible to miss is a cinema-theme carpet that covers all guest corridors. I found comfort when I was told that it was designed by

a local artist, which hopefully means it will have to be replaced by something more sensible after a few successful film premieres.

Surveying the handsome building from the square, I wondered whether Andersson had another hit on his hands or if it would have to trade down like so many other similar ventures. Given that this is something far beyond boutique, that the offer is more appealing to a wider audience, I think he does. Stockholm finally has a hotel it's long been lacking.

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