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The Whitby
Kit Kemp waxes lyrical at Firmedale's latest
opening in Midtown Manhattan

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HOTEL REVIEW



The Whitby

NEW YORK

Firmedale Hotels has opened its second New York property in Midtown, with interiors that blend quintessential British style with an eclectic mix of global influences.

Words: Matt Turner | Photography: © Simon Brown

It's the final morning of New York Design Week and Kit Kemp is sitting in the Orangery – a light-filled, elegantly-appointed room at the back of The Whitby Hotel, sipping tea from a china cup. The night before, the hotel hosted a supper with the New Craftsmen to celebrate "Baskets of Britain" – an installation first displayed at Decorex in 2015, which saw basketmaker Hilary Burns bring together 52 different baskets from across the British Isles, displaying the time-honoured techniques of this ancient craft. The baskets now take pride of place above the 30ft pewter bar in The Whitby, having been carefully transported from across the pond.

It's a timely reminder of Firmedale Hotels' British roots, for when Tim and Kit Kemp first brought their quintessentially English style of boutique hotel to New York, many observers wondered how the city would react. Yet Crosby Street – the hotel they opened in SoHo in 2011 – was an instant, runaway success.

Now the group have opened their second NYC hotel. The Whitby is perhaps the more grown-up, elder brother to Crosby Street. Yet in comparison to the other, mostly conservative hotels in Upper Midtown, it still wears its heart on its exquisitely-tailored sleeve,

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Above: Artwork in the lobby includes a Marten Baas grandfather clock, marble sculptures by Stephen Cox, and a multi-coloured loom by Hermione Skye O'Hea

the bold interiors displaying designer Kit Kemp's usual insouciance and wit.

Architects Stonehill & Taylor have created a handsome limestone newbuild with expansive steel frame windows, influenced by the surrounding architecture, particularly that of nearby Fifth Avenue. Thanks to the stepped façade that gradually scales back as the building rises, numerous rooms enjoy open-air balconies and terraces. Inside, meanwhile, the building has been given an unmistakable personality of its own.

Kit Kemp takes up the story: "We felt Upper Midtown was crying out for an injection of colour and fun, and that's what we do well. It can be a little bit too serious up here so we saw an opportunity to rejuvenate it." Colour and fun are certainly in abundance throughout the ground floor public areas, a series of interlinked, yet distinct, spaces comprising lobby, bar, restaurant and conservatory.

There are humorous touches throughout. In the lobby, guests waiting for the elevators are kept entertained by a Marten Baas mixed media installation, for which the artist was filmed so he seems to be standing inside a traditional grandfather clock, drawing various times of day on a translucent clock face in felt tip. Other artworks in the lobby include three marble sculptures by Stephen Cox, and a multi-coloured loom by Hermione Skye O'Hea suspended above the reception desk.

The two large chandeliers above us in the Orangery – influenced by those in a 1920s Parisian brasserie – have been embellished with a parrot and toucan from an antiques store in Dorset: "With a newbuild you want to create some sense of a story and give the room strength, otherwise you just walk through it without feeling anything. Because there were no views outside from here, a feature wall of 40 illuminated pots by Martha Freud – each etched with a landmark New York building or bridge – provides a sense of place." Antique meat platters, sourced from Ebay then framed in perspex, flank the antique church font that is the room's centrepiece.

Construction of the hotel involved digging down three storeys to create extensive event spaces, including a 130 seat screening room. The oak and bronze staircase leading down to these subterranean areas is decorated in Kate Blee's 'Tribal' wallpaper, and a 20ft high canvas by pop artist Joe Tilson. Meeting rooms feature wallpaintings in terracotta pink by English artist Melissa White, lino prints by Eileen Cooper, and mosaics, based on original floor designs by Boris Anrep from the National Gallery. These rooms open on to a towering central foyer – nicknamed 'the Bollywood spill-out' – which is entombed in hessian backed walkcoverings with a six-foot vertically repeating pattern of Indian deities, palm trees and sacred cows. Works depicting typical New York scenes by photomontage artist Peter Rocklin are also on display.





Above: In the Orangerie, a double-height font is flanked by a collection of vintage meat platters, encased in perspex. The chandelier is based on that in a Parisian brasserie, and customised with a toucan and parrot bought by Kit Kemp at a Dorset antique shop. Backlit pots by Martha Freud depicting New York landmarks form a feature wall
Left: The headboard in this corner suite is inspired by Russian folk art



Above: Wallpapers and fabrics throughout the hotel include many of Kit Kemp's own designs including 'Travelling Light' for Christopher Farr Cloth

"These rooms are brand new," says Kemp of the meeting spaces, "but what I wanted to achieve was a feeling of history so that when you sit and dine or party in these rooms, they have some feeling of the past. We've tried to create spaces that capture the imagination."

Throughout the hotel Kemp's daring juxtaposition of vibrant fabrics (many of them her own designs for Christopher Farr Cloth), carefully selected artworks and layered textures is in evidence.

The Whitby Bar and Restaurant is a rich, colourful space with high ceilings, upholstered banquettes and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking West 56th Street. In The Drawing Room residents' lounge, an antique Greek fireplace featuring garlanded leaves and acorns sits alongside a bespoke library, overstuffed furnishings and an honesty bar.

Guestrooms feature signature Firmedale flourishes, such as boldly patterned headboards, tailors' dummies, and Designers Guild paints. The bathrooms will be familiar to anyone who has stayed in a Firmedale hotel, with their Arabescato marble finishes, Aquavision waterproof TVs and Lefroy Brooks brassware and basins.

The entire top floor is devoted to the Whitby Suite – an 1,845m² space including two king size bedrooms, a large living room, guest powder room and kitchen. Doors lead onto two sweeping terraces with stunning views of New York, spanning both sides of the hotel.

In the living areas, an 18th century Scandinavian cabinet sits at one end of the room, its layers of paint peeling away and providing the cue for the colour scheme elsewhere in the room. A Chesterfield sofa has been delicately embroidered by textile artist Pippa Caley.

Firmedale's signature look may be instantly recognisable, but it has also developed over the years. They have gradually moved away from the English country house style that defined the earlier hotels to a more eclectic, quirky mélange of global influences that feels appropriate in the melting pot of New York: "We carve our own path," concludes Kemp. "You can have a signature look but you don't want to be doing the same thing over and over."

With that our tour is at an end, and she is whisked off to shoot a series of short films to promote the new hotel, appropriately entitled 'Every Room Tells A Story'.

EXPRESS CHECK-OUT: 86 guestrooms and suites | 1 restaurant | 1 bar | 3 meeting rooms and screening room | www.firmedale.com
Owner / Operator: Firmedale Hotels | Architecture: Stonehill & Taylor | Interior Design: Kit Kemp