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Section D

LIGHTING UP THE TOWN

New downtown hotels
are changing
San Francisco's look,
from stodgy to stylish

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SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Lights, action. Forget traditionalism — a more modern approach is coming, finally, to the San Francisco hotel scene.

The latest and most visible example of this trend is the Embarcadero's Le Méridien Hotel. Formerly a Park Hyatt, the 24-story building at 333 Battery St. was acquired by Starwood Hotels this year and reopened as part of the swanky Le Méridien group.

On Wednesday, they will relaunch the hotel with a "First Night" celebration, a grand fete that is equal parts gallery opening and corporate shindig. But far from being just another excuse to stuff yourself with tiny quich-



ALEXIA SILVANI

Thierry Dreyfus designed the display of colored gelled windows at the new Le Méridien Hotel, right.

es, "First Night" is the debut of a three-month-long installation, by tres en vogue lighting designer Thierry Dreyfus, that will transform the building into a tower of colored light.

For years, the dominant aesthetic in San Francisco's finest hotels has been of the wood-paneled-and-leather-banquette variety. Though the dim lighting and warm interiors of Union Square perennials, such as the Mark Hopkins and the Fairmont, give off the patrician feel of an old boys' club — and induce an insatiable thirst for a Gim Rickey — finally it may be time for something more modern, even in this famously traditional town.

In the aftermath of the successful remodel of the Cliff Hotel, Ian Schrager-ized in 2001 over vociferous objections, comes a number of hotels whose recent goings-on suggest that there's nothing inhospitable about stowing the cigar-smoky waistcoats in favor of something more

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LIGHTING UP THE TOWN



Le Méridien Hotel



Le Méridien Hotel



BRANT WARD / The Chronicle

Hotels new and old: Le Méridien Hotel, top and left, is the new hotel in the Embarcadero. The Redwood Room, right, is the mainstay of the Clift Hotel, which pays homage to hotels of old.

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modish, of which the Méridien project is the most prominent recent example.

Fashionistas may recall Dreyfus' lighting work at the runway shows of such luminaries as Calvin Klein, Yves Saint Laurent and Helmut Lang. And those of us who don't work for Vogue may know Dreyfus from his success lighting the re-opening of Paris' Grand Palais last year, a commission he won in an international competition.

Dreyfus will kick off the birth of Le Méridien San Francisco by placing colored gels on the windows of many guest rooms. At night, when guests turn on and off their lights, the windows glow in an ever-shifting pattern of colored light that owes as much to Mondrian as Rubik's Cube.

"My goal was to try to accomplish something where the people inside experience the color in a different way than the people outside," Dreyfus said from Venice. "The aesthetic view is important, but it's just as important for me that people will walk into the light and experience something — not just something conceptual or intellectual, but something direct. Inside the rooms, there is living light breathing and creating a sense of calm. And outside it's like the building is alive, like the facade creates its own light."

"We wanted to reactivate the place in a visible and creative way," said Jerome Sans, cultural curator for Le Méridien Hotels and founder of the Palais de Tokyo, a revelatory museum of contemporary art in Paris that opened in 2002. "We want to start a new history for this hotel, and because all the physical aspects already existed, the idea was to change things that seem to be static." Other "First Night" openings in the coming months are scheduled for Shanghai and Split, Croatia. "Each new opening is one chapter in the book that develops throughout our locations."

In addition to Dreyfus' installation, which is set to run until Jan. 31, Le Méridien has partnered with the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, allowing guests free access to the center's exhibitions. And for those agoraphobics who dare not leave the hotel lobby, the hotel's library is being transformed into a gallery, featuring work from Yerba Buena artists. "The goal is to show that art goes beyond the museum," said Sans, who will be attending "First Night" with Dreyfus. "This is an experiment to invite the artist to interact with the viewer in a living space. It's like curating a real place."

Another hotel bucking the aristocratic aesthetic trend is the Orchard Garden at 466 Bush St. at Grant Avenue, just a few feet from the Chinatown Gate. The visual palette is far lighter and more serene than some of its boutique hotel competition, but the Orchard Garden, set to open in November,



KATY RAGGATZ / The Chronicle

"My goal was to try to accomplish something where the people inside experience the color in a different way than the people outside."

Le Méridien Hotel lighting designer
THIERRY DREYFUS

seeks to distinguish itself from the pack on grounds that are more than simply stylistic.

"Upon accreditation, we will be the first LEED-certified hotel in California," said Stefan Mühle, general manager of the sister Orchard Hotel, "and we are very confident that we will receive it." LEED (Leadership in Energy and

Environmental Design) Scale certification is meted out by the U.S. Green Building Council and rates how environmentally efficient a building is.

Not surprisingly, natural light is critical to the Orchard Garden's mission and aesthetic. The lobby's design is light and airy, with wooden accents and a skylight above the restaurant. Archie Held's bronze and glass water sculpture and bronze screens comply with the hotel's Public Art Program and complement the bright, spallike quality that pervades the open, optimistic space. Style aside, though, this hotel is a hard-working little conservationist.

"People often ask," Mühle said, "What's so green about your hotel? It's true we don't have solar panels on the roof, but we're green in a lot of unsexy ways. The backing to the carpet is made of recycled material, the toilet paper, too, and the linens. The cleansers are made with fruit extracts, and the room keys automatically shut off all the lights when you leave the room. A lot of what we do is informed by wanting to be green, but also by just being economical and smart."

Rounding out the field of the forward-looking is the chic Clift Hotel at 495 Geary St. The surrealist lobby, spare, mod rooms, and well-apportioned bar and restaurant by design doyen Philippe Starck give a wry, postmodern nod to the old-school before running gleefully amok. The centerpiece is, of course, the Redwood Room. A jaw-dropping vestige from the hotel's early days, the walls are covered in Deco redwood panels,

and a dim glow lends the whole place a voluptuous old-time feel. The bar, however, has been replaced with modernist lapidary glass, and the video monitors on the walls shift from gilt Klimts to guilty lovers eyeing each other surreptitiously. The Clift appropriates many of the tropes of San Francisco's traditional hotels (see the fire burning away in the massive fireplace in the lobby) while achieving something significantly more avant-garde.

Now, before those of you who like your old-boys' clubs dim and your Manhattans stiff light up the phone banks at the Office of Historical Preservation, rest assured that some old San Francisco charm is still alive and well. Though the Patent Leather bar went the way of the Edsel a couple of years ago, the St. Francis at 335 Powell St. can still satisfy your craving for when Silent Cal still ran things.

But if you have a yen for a more contemporary or adventurous

touch, consider the work of Dreyfus and his colleagues in modernization. "At Le Méridien I wanted to change how people look at things through light and color," Dreyfus said. "Imagine going into your hotel room and seeing San Francisco all in blue. That's something you wouldn't be used to."

Freelance writer Aaron Britt is a frequent contributor to Dwell, the New York Times Magazine and other publications.