

LONDON EVENING STANDARD | JUNE 12, 2013

IAN SCHRAGER: KING OF CLUBS AND HOTELS, IS BACK IN LONDON

The king of clubs and hotels is back in town with a new venture and our very own Studio 54. Ian Schrager talks to Laura Chesters about fast living and fatherhood.

Dressed comfortably in jeans, white socks and slip-on shoes, Ian Schrager appears pretty low key. The king of New York's most famous hotels and nightclub — he is the man behind legendary hangout Studio 54 and is often credited as the father of the boutique hotel — is now 66 and his relaxed manner could lead you to believe he is taking it easy after a lifetime of cutting-edge design and partying.

But when the rasping and gravelly Brooklyn drawl begins to explain why he is back in London, it's clear Schrager is still as driven to succeed as ever.

"I want new challenges. It's time to step up again. If it weren't for continuing to push the envelope I would just stay with my family," he says.

He is back in town to open his first hotel here for 13 years. After making his name with business partner Steve Rubell at Studio 54 — for a time the world's best-known nightclub with regulars including Andy Warhol, Liza Minnelli and Mick Jagger — the pair then created some of the world's best-known hotels and re-launched the Royalton in New York which was designed by Philippe Starck.

Schrager's concept was as much about the lobby and hotel bar as the rooms, and the Sanderson and St Martin's Lane were once the places to be seen in London. But a lot has changed since 2000 and boutique hotels are now as common as coffee shops.

This time Schrager has teamed up with US giant Marriott to open a 173-room hotel in what was previously the Berners Hotel in Fitzrovia, just down the road from the Sanderson. It will be part of a Schrager and Marriott joint venture that will eventually create 100 hotels across the world under the Edition brand. The London hotel will even have its own version of the Studio 54 nightclub on site. The idea behind Edition is to create hotels that fit with their surroundings in each country — not an Identikit corporate fit-out.

"London has always been great," Schrager says. "It's a world-class city, up there with New York, Miami and LA. There's a lot of energy here — a lot going on."

He admits the Olympics helped London but says "everything is energised — the food, design, fashion, art — it's a cultural capital. When we were doing Studio 54 ... I think London has that vibe."

After a life of drink, drugs and sex in the late Seventies, does Schrager think he missed out on a normal family life? “I have finally learned that there is a balance. Having a perfect family isn’t enough. And having the best job isn’t, either.”

He is pretty privileged to have been able to have both. He has two daughters from his first marriage, and a son with his second wife, Tania, who also has two daughters from a previous relationship. Both his present and former wives were ballerinas (“My wife doesn’t like me to say it, but I like dancers”). “I have done it all,” he says. “I’m fortunate. I haven’t missed anything.”

Despite what appears to be a jet-set lifestyle, Schrager insists he doesn’t travel that often. On a typical day he comes home at 4.30pm “to see my son.”

But he admits that when he first had kids he was “too focused on work. I didn’t give everything”. He says his daughters “don’t resent this — they understand. But I now know the difference.”

In London he is packing a lot in, including hanging out with his close friend John Pawson, the British minimalist architect. Pawson has worked on Schrager’s apartment business and designed The Residences at Miami Beach, part of an Edition hotel that will open next year. Schrager says: “He is the quintessential Englishman. He did my home in New York.”

Part of his desire to keep moving means he doesn’t stay in the hotels he has created. He explains: “It’s like high school. I never go back. I don’t like staying in hotels that I don’t own any more. It would be unsettling if things had changed.”

This time he is staying in Firmdale’s Charlotte Street Hotel, which is owned by British husband and wife team Tim and Kit Kemp. “I like townhouse hotels and they do a good job. It has a feel of the city and the decor is very British,” he says.

Like Schrager’s most famous nightclub, his hotel concept has been copied ever since. So how does he cope with his ideas being ripped off?

“I created a Frankenstein monster. It’s like Modernist buildings. There are the uninspired versions, the copies. With boutique hotels it isn’t just about design, it’s about magic. Some do it well and some don’t. It wasn’t that I was better, it was that I was different. I am always trying to do something that no one else is.”

Schrager went solo after he lost Rubell to an Aids-related illness in 1989. He continued to open trend-setting hotels until he sold his Morgans Hotel Group for a reported \$400 million in 2005.

He clearly isn't short of cash, so why is the king of cool working with a dull corporate giant such as Marriott?

"I see it like Disney and Pixar. We are both very successful at what we do but we are different. I can turn on a dime and I travel at 100mph and they are in a huge battleship. Turning takes a long time. But I can't do what they can and they can't do what I do."

He insists it isn't all about the money. "Money hasn't driven me. If it's not something sexy or something special I'm not interested. I am not stamping out widgets. It isn't about money, it's about the end result. I am more like Steve Jobs than Bill Gates."

In spite of his protestations he admits: "I have to be a good businessman because what I do is so capital-intensive."

While Marriott gears up to launch the London Edition, Schrager is already busy trying to find a spot for another of his projects. He has his own, separate hotel business, Public.

He has already opened Public in the States and is scouring sites in London. He did have a location agreed in Shoreditch but the deal fell apart, so he is back on the hunt.

How does he think his new creations will fare with the sophisticated audience of 2013?

"It's stagecraft. Alchemy. I can just spot something earlier than others. I am a social scientist. I watch where people are headed, what is in the street. I try to get the collective unconscious. It's instinctive. It comes together and I enjoy it."

Londoners will be able to judge for themselves when Edition opens this autumn.