



GERBER GROUP

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# THE STORY OF W

**It's been 20 years since the first W Hotel opened in midtown Manhattan, bringing with it a riotous mix of celebrity, nightlife, and high design. STEVEN KURUTZ looks back on the brand's two fabulous decades and reflects on how it changed our ideas of what a hotel should be.**

**WHEN THE W HOTEL** opened in New York City, in December 1998, the event had a buzz more befitting of a Hollywood premiere. It had a movie-style tagline—"Come to your senses"—and an opening-night party overflowing with celebrities, models, and style influencers such as the design and retail legend Terence Conran, who was spotted taking photos with a tiny camera. The showbiz vibe was appropriate, because the hotel industry was about to witness the arrival of a new, theatrical era. Much like the movies more than half a century earlier, it was about to explode into glorious Technicolor. One visitor described that first W as "like being on hotel acid." The property was perception-altering, both visually and in the way it reframed the guest experience. Who had ever seen a hotel lobby with a two-story hammered stone fireplace and voluminous leather banquettes that summoned people to hang out, whether they were staying at the hotel or not? Or ground-floor windows of rippled, colored glass that let in light from the street but softened and distorted it, as if through a scrim?

PHOTOS BY STEVEN KURUTZ FOR TRAVEL + LEISURE. THE W HOTEL: COURTESY OF W HOTELS. SCOTT GERBER: COURTESY OF W HOTELS. RANDE GERBER: COURTESY OF W HOTELS. SCOTT GERBER: COURTESY OF W HOTELS. RANDE GERBER: COURTESY OF W HOTELS.

The windows were inspired by a Richard Diebenkorn painting," said David Rockwell, the architect hired by Starwood Hotels and its founder Barry Sternlicht to transform a tired conventioner's inn at Lexington Avenue and 49th Street into the flagship of a new boutique-hotel chain. Sternlicht's directive was "to merge high-design elements with high levels of service and comfort." There had been similar hotels before—notably, the Royalton and the Paramount, both Manhattan properties opened by Ian Schrager and designed by Philippe Starck. But the W refined and commercialized the concept. Now, business travelers could check in to a sexy hotel and still get their boss's faxes (it was the 90s, after all). Brothers Scott and Rande Gerber ran the hotel's bar Whiskey Blue—for a time the city's hottest nightspot. This was another revelation. "Who ever heard of a cool bar in midtown?" Scott Gerber said, laughing. But the lounge was packed every night with Park Avenue suits, young creatives, and boldfaced names like George Clooney, Cindy Crawford (Rande's wife), and Derek Jeter, who was so impressed by the bed-size ottoman and the beautiful

clientele that he was reprimanded by Yankees owner George Steinbrenner for being out too much. One year after the W's launch, the standard and the Ace debuted—both taking the W's democratization of interior design as their guiding principle. In the years that followed, all three brands saw rapid growth across the U.S. As hotels popped up in cities like New Orleans; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Portland, Oregon, it seemed as if each location became instantly anointed as desirable and cool. The W has since expanded to 22 other countries, with 40 more hotels in development, from Marrakesh to Xiamen, China. Meanwhile, 15 original Ws in the U.S., including the first midtown location, are slated for renovation—or rebranding. As the W has grown, it has become, in some ways, a victim of its own success: its breakthroughs have become so ubiquitous, they're now considered standard amenities. Reflecting on the original W's legacy, Rockwell said: "A hotel where you would go to hang out and get a coffee, even if you weren't staying over—the W was the beginning of that thing. It was this explosion of energy."



**Grand Entrance** Though the first W (left), launched in 1998 on New York's Lexington Avenue, was not architecturally remarkable, it helped define the modern hotel-nightlife complex. Cindy Crawford (right) and her husband, Rande Gerber—who ran the hotel bar Whiskey Blue—were fixtures.

**Fresh Ideas** Created by David Rockwell, the first W's Living Room (left)—a space that has appeared in every W since—established the brand's fondness for whimsical high design. The W New York-Union Square (right), opened in 2001 in a Beaux-Arts tower, was another W that brought contemporary chic to a classic building, a strategy adopted by Ace hotels and many others.

**Brand Evolution** The lobby of the W New York-Union Square (left) reflected the brand's notion of the hotel as a stylish, all-day hangout, even for nonguests. After W began expanding overseas in 2003, it brought along its trademark design sensibility, as seen in this guest room at the W Shanghai-The Bund (right).

**Going Global** The brand also exported its pop-culture bona fides, recruiting stars like musician Mark Ronson (left), who attended the opening of the W Paris-Opéra in 2012. With the introduction last year of its latest property, a resort in Goa, India (right), W is in 23 countries worldwide.