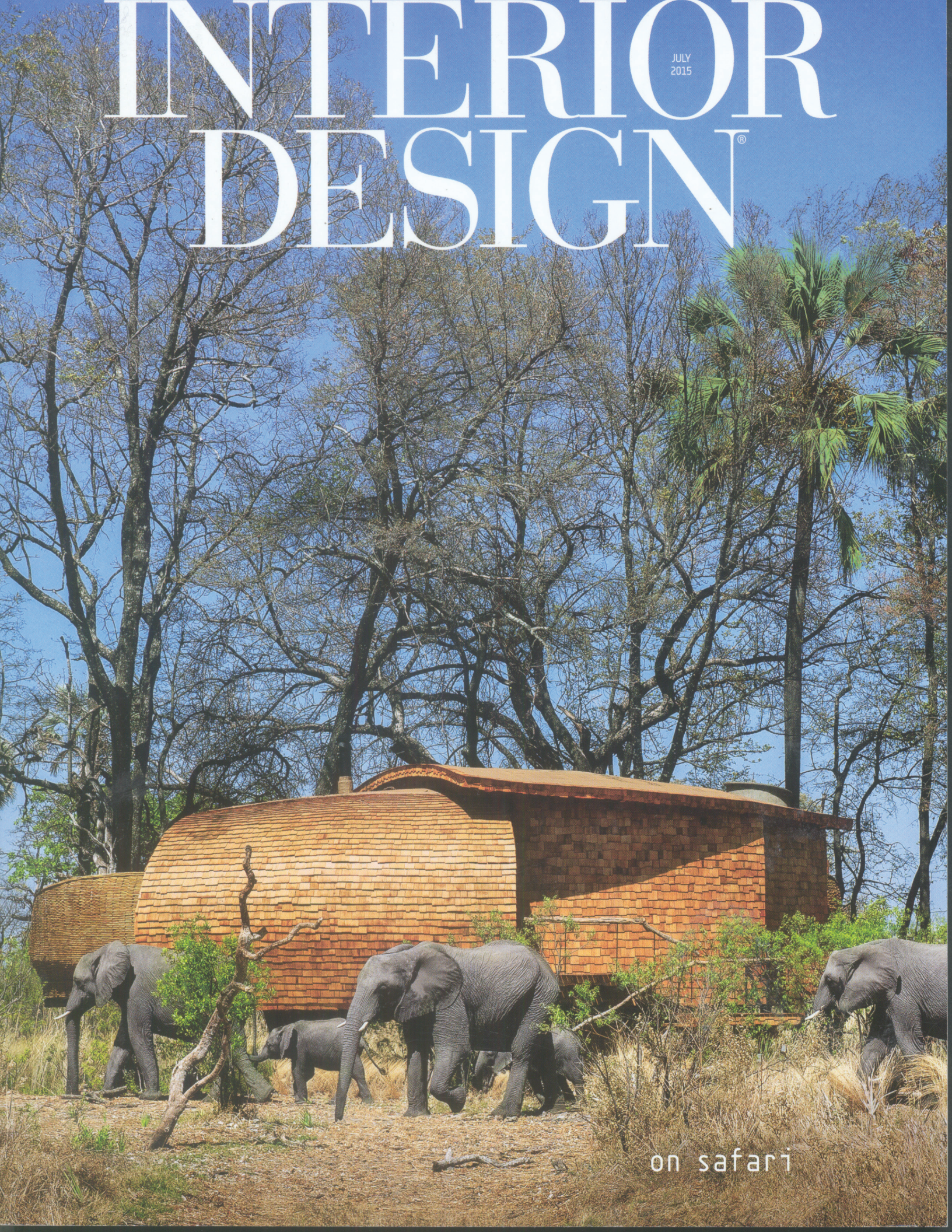


# INTERIOR DESIGN®

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on safari





# *virgin terrain*

Rockwell Group Europe blazes a trail of innovation and preservation at Virgin Hotels Chicago

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**Previous spread, left:** Rockwell Group Europe converted a 1928 landmark by Rapp and Rapp into Virgin Hotels Chicago.

**Previous spread, right:** The standard guest rooms feature a bed upholstered in faux leather and wall covering in wool felt, both custom.

**Top:** Wool carpet at the entry was conceived as a paint spill.

**Center:** The bed's patented padded corner allows for extra lounging. **Bottom:** Polyester velvet drapes a nook at Miss Ricky's, a riff on the diner.

**Opposite:** Capped by a plaster ceiling, now restored, the onetime banking hall now houses a restaurant, the Commons Club.



"Honoring the historic Chicago fabric became goal number one"



**When Richard Branson** announced plans for his Virgin Group to open 20 hotels around the world, expectations immediately hit the roof. Pundits predicted a slew of modernist buildings, and everyone anticipated new notions in lodging, too. Known for reclassifying and reengineering every aspect of travel, hospitality, and entertainment—on-demand dining aboard Virgin Atlantic Airways, for example—Branson never assumes that precedents are worth following, not even the best-established ones.

The first Virgin Hotels location, a 1928 landmarked Chicago bank by the noted movie theater architects Rapp and Rapp, is just steps from the famed Loop's elevated train. Honoring that historic fabric became goal number one for Rockwell Group Europe, an offshoot of *Interior Design* Hall of Fame member David Rockwell's U.S. firm. At the time, Rockwell Group Europe's creative director was Diego Gronda. (He recently left to start his own firm.) And Gronda already knew Branson, having started work a dozen years ago on his massive private retreat in New Jersey, of all exotic locales—a project that was never fully realized.

Known for nonstop traveling, staying at a different hotel every night to keep abreast of the latest hospitality trends, Gronda was equally passionate about the Chicago project's number-two goal: CEO Raul Leal was looking for an unmistakably Virgin-branded lifestyle experience where, as always, no detail or process is taken for granted. Gronda was prepared to deliver, based on more research per square foot than a robotics lab. "The result had to be this masterpiece envisaged by Leal but at the same time preserve Chicago's glorious past," Rockwell explains.

The 26-story flagship's 250 guest rooms are awash in originality. Their doors in Virgin red are accompanied by matching sconces that would look right at home on a front porch and, if you've reserved a pet-friendly room, a life-size porcelain pooch waiting patiently under the light. In standard rooms, the first things you notice upon entering ➤





**Top, from left:** In a guest room, the oak top of a custom table rotates. A custom chandelier at the restaurant features acrylic orbs containing toy figurines. **Bottom, from left:** Color-changing LEDs transform a corner of the restaurant. The valet stand for the diner is a reproduction British phone booth.

**Opposite top, from left:** Porcelain dogs indicate pet-friendly guest rooms. In a penthouse suite's bathroom, tile frames trompe l'oeil vinyl wall covering. **Opposite bottom:** A guest room's custom chair has a Vespa scooter's front for a backrest.

