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January 22, 2016 11:40 am

The latest water features making a splash in home design

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Designers are responding to demand for room-sized aquariums, pirate caves and indoor waterfalls in high-end homes



A 16ft-long aquarium, with pool beyond, at a house in Orange County, California

When Dubai opens its Water Discus Hotel, half of it will be submerged under the sea, the other half emerging like a floating spaceship. The project does not yet have an estimated completion date but its futuristic design features a series of interconnected discuses above the water and others that plummet deep beneath the waves. The best suites will not only have panoramic views of marine life but also their own private artificial reefs, made visible by adjusting underwater lights. (Plans to feed the fish at the push of a button have had to be scrapped.)

For millennia, water has been both a source of life and wonder. In Andalusia, Spain, the Moors, who invaded the Iberian peninsula in 711, used irrigation systems built by the Romans around the 1st century AD to create a network of interior fountains and pools in private palaces and homes, as much for pleasure as practicality.

Now, with new technology, water can be incorporated into interior design more creatively than ever — and not only in hotels. Deep Ocean Technology (DOT), the Polish company behind the Water Discus Hotel in Dubai and Zen Resort, an underwater hotel being built in the Maldives, is designing a private residence in the United Arab Emirates.



CGI of a suite at the Water Discus Hotel, Dubai

Preliminary sketches include an above-water edifice shaped like a saucer that comes with a helipad, kitchen and staff quarters, and an underwater disc that contains an opulent apartment. Part-cruise ship, part-stationary submarine, the developments costs start at \$40m to \$50m. One of the largest challenges will be to ensure the safety of the structure on the waves. “This will be the first residence of its kind in the world,” says Krzysztof Koniuszaniec, project and research manager at DOT.

Water features are increasingly popular with owners of high-end homes. “Water is something that can be manipulated and reformed in so many different ways ... it allows a limitless opportunity for creation,” says Dylan Wiman, director of business development at International Concept Management (ICM), a specialist in aquariums and oceanariums (large-scale seawater aquariums). The attraction of gazing at a shoal of fluorescent fish, turtles or even small sharks is, says Wiman, “something to do with the unknown, about a different world that we don’t get to see very often. People are mesmerised by aquariums because it takes them to another reality.”



'Embrace' water sculpture by Barton Rubenstein

ICM, which is based in the US, focuses mostly on commercial projects but has some private clients. One example is a 16ft-long aquarium at a beach house in Orange County, California, completed in 2002. One of its walls serves as a window into the underground sitting room, while another doubles up as a wall of the pool. The aquarium is sandwiched between the two so that from the sitting room sofa you can see past the fish to the people swimming in the pool beyond.

The majority of ICM's clients are from the US, the Middle East and Russia, and they spend anything between \$300,000 and \$800,000. Many ask for aquariums that are viewable through their pools. Other features include "water curtains" of streaming liquid or mist on

to which it is possible to project light shows or video footage.

Midwest Tropical in the US also designs water features — but in high-rise apartments. They range from a 20ft waterfall in a downtown Chicago penthouse to a 30ft-long water curtain in a 33rd-floor flat in Michigan, featuring computer-controlled lighting that changes colour based on the season and time of day.

The biggest challenge is often getting such features inside the tower blocks. "Units are extensively tested in our factory before being disassembled into sections small enough to fit into the building's elevators and reassembled once inside," says Michael W Burnett, vice-president of sales and marketing.



'Pirate cavern' with low-hanging rocks, swim-up bar and animated pirates

Customised pools are another way to make an impact. Caviness Landscape Designs in Oklahoma builds pools inside and outside homes, each with its own theme. A typical client's budget is more than \$200,000. Past projects have included a 3,200 sq ft "pirate cavern" with low-hanging rocks, starfish, a swim-up bar and even animated pirates who warn swimmers to "get away from me treasure, you scallywag".

“Fire features are huge right now, especially incorporated into the pool design,” says company owner Kathy Caviness. “Shelves in the pool where loungers can be placed are popular as well . . . Waterfalls and spillovers are always popular because they are visually appealing as well as [making] a soothing sound.”

It is possible to enjoy water features at home without undergoing major construction, however. Soothing Walls in the US offers ready-made indoor fountains and design features. They include the Sisters Wall Fountain, an earthy depiction of two women, one orange, one blue, for \$1,125, and a slicker 8ft clear-glass floor fountain on a stainless steel platform (\$4,395). The latter has a fire pit at the base so that flames flicker next to the streaming water, providing a clash of elements.

British sculptor David Harber makes personalised water features for the home and garden. “Chalice” is a large silver sundial shaped like a goblet in which water is pumped around the outer rim in a circular motion. Harber’s “Dark Planet Fountain” consists of a giant ball made from gleaming black pebble stones with water cascading down their surfaces. And his “Vortex” is a spiralling whirlpool within a shallow stainless-steel crucible lit by LED lights.



Glass floor fountain with fire pit

Water is something “all humans gravitate towards”, says Barton Rubenstein, a US artist and physicist. He first became aware of its power while canoeing. “You have to study the river when it becomes very rough to determine the safe passage through it — and I’ve always been mesmerised by the complexity and beauty of water,” he says.

His sculptures — one of which is on loan to the official residence of the vice-president in Washington, DC — fall into two categories: those with water flowing over stainless steel or stone surfaces; and those in which water is itself a sculptural form, falling through the air into a pool or a cluster of stones.



Midwest Tropical's 30ft-long rainwater curtain in a Michigan home

With an MSc in mathematics and computer science, Rubenstein is able to incorporate hydrodynamics into his work. “Embrace” is a stainless steel indoor sculpture of two jagged columns encircled by twisted metal, with water cascading down their sharp edges. The surfaces “must hold the water as it slides down,” says Rubenstein — yet since they are undercut, rather than vertical, the water could drop off, creating a large splash. However, there also needs to be a large enough volume of water to cover the edges, so it is a delicate balance. The elegant design now sits in a private residence in Nebraska. Rubenstein’s one-off and limited-edition pieces cost from \$25,000 to more than \$100,000.

The challenges of such water features are plentiful. Whether a pool, aquarium or sculpture, maintenance is a concern, as is environmental impact. (Rubenstein's sculptures are designed to recycle their own water.) Important, too, is the ability to control splash and sound. While the gentle lapping and gurgling of water can be soothing, too much of a roar inside the house can be irritating.

There is another option. In 2012 the Stirling Prize-winning architect Zaha Hadid unveiled a furniture collection called Liquid Glacial at London's David Gill Gallery; new pieces from the same series went on sale this June. The furniture is modelled on the ethereal ice formations of a melting glacier, with ripples, swirls and wavelets frozen just beneath the surface of hand-polished acrylic resin. Admittedly, owning one of these stools, tables or chairs is not quite the same as having an underwater apartment — but in the right drawing room, they are sure to make a splash.

Photographs: ICM; Deep Ocean Technology; Barton Rubenstein; KO Rinearson Photography; thesoothingcompany.com