



Aron Harilela takes stock of the Lockhart Road site in Wan Chai where The Hari, the first hotel he is building from scratch, is a work in progress

Under Construction

Some might consider this an inopportune moment to open a new hotel in Hong Kong. Aron Harilela thinks it's perfect timing *By Eric Wilson. Photography by Inga Beckmann. Styling by Christie Simpson*

Can anyone really say anything with absolute certainty these days?

Well, there's this: "I think 2020 is going to look very ugly," says Aron Harilela, chairman and CEO of Harilela Group, the Hong Kong-based hospitality company that has owned hotels since it was established by his father, Hari Harilela, and uncle George in 1959. With occupancy rates dropping as low as the single digits industry-wide this spring, no one could argue the year will be anything but a financial disaster for companies that rely heavily on tourism and travel. The big question is what comes next. And certainty holds a great deal of importance in the worldview of Harilela, who, during his recently concluded tenure as chairman of the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce, was frequently vocal about his belief that much of the city's unrest was rooted in the disillusionment of young people with their government and their future.

"I've said this recently, and I will get my wrist slapped for saying it again, but I don't care," he says. "I think that people don't have security in Hong Kong. They don't."

Nevertheless, Harilela, 49, remains decidedly optimistic. So much so, he's going ahead with plans to open a new upscale hotel, The Hari, a ground-up construction with 210 rooms, a Japanese restaurant and a chic outdoor terrace within the commercial heart of Wan Chai later this year, a move that could have been seen as considerably risky even before the onslaught of a global pandemic.

"We've always wanted to reinvest in Hong Kong," says Harilela during an interview in the Harilela Group offices, just a few blocks from the Holiday Inn Golden Mile in Kowloon that his father opened in 1975. He looks as relaxed and dapper as ever in his signature style of a Milanese custom-tailored suit and open-collared shirt, offset with bracelets of wooden beads and one shaped like a polo mallet. "We've gone from Thailand to New York to London, but we've never really spent our time reinvesting in Hong Kong, and this is the place that started us in the hotel business."

Neither protests nor Covid-19, nor a trade war, nor even the swift passing of the National Security Law in June has shaken his confidence.

"This one has to work," Harilela says. "If it works, and I'm quite certain it will, then this will be the direction of the company."

While the privately held Harilela Group ranks among the hotel industry's most formidable and savvy players when it comes to buying properties—its portfolio of 16 hotels includes five Holiday Inns throughout Asia, the InterContinental Grand Stanford in Hong Kong, 50 Bowery in New York City and the Grand Coloane Resort in Macau—it had never actually managed a hotel until Harilela, eager to venture in a new direction, opened his first The Hari in London in 2016. That hotel replaced an existing Harilela Group property that was being managed by Thompson Hotels and that had been known as the Sheraton Belgravia when Harilela acquired the building in 1997 (this was just few years after he completed his studies in law and political philosophy and joined the family business). But The Hari in Hong Kong, which is being

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built from scratch, is more symbolic, as the physical representation of the Harilela family's importance to a city where so many luxury hotel brands are headquartered, including The Peninsula, Mandarin Oriental, Shangri-La, Rosewood, Langham and Ovolo, that hotel rooms might be considered one of its most important exports.

"Well, that's the plan for The Hari: to be recognised, maybe not in the same space as the Mandarin or the Shangri-La, but it will evoke what Hong Kong is all about: dynamism, multiculturalism, just efficiency that comes in a nice way, efficiency that's not charmless. 'Charmed efficiency,' if you can put it that way," says Harilela.

The name—The Hari—is obviously a homage to his father, who died in 2014, but it also speaks to the legacy of an extraordinary Indian family that has long fascinated Hongkongers with its incredible spirit of community. The Harilelas live together in a distinctive green mosaic-tiled mansion in Kowloon Tong built in the 1970s that features lavish spaces for entertaining, a temple, a movie theatre and separate apartments for the various branches of the four-generation clan, housing more than 80 people at times. According to the family, Hari Harilela built the compound to fulfil a promise made long before he achieved his success: "As we were together in poverty, we should not separate in wealth."



Etro jacket,
Brunello
Cucinelli T-shirt,
Ermenegildo Zegna
trousers

Ralph Lauren jacket,
Giorgio Armani T-shirt



“I’m opening the first hotel I’ve ever built in the worst time in Hong Kong, and it feels surreal, if that makes any sense”

It was Naroomal Lilaram Mirchandani, Hari’s father and Aron’s grandfather, a Sindhi Hindu merchant from Hyderabad, who established the family’s presence in East Asia in the 1930s and invented the surname Harilela—a portmanteau of those of his mother, Haribai, and his father, Lilaram. “He was travelling to India when his mother passed away, and they cremated her before he arrived, so he got very upset with the family,” Aron Harilela says. In Hong Kong, Naroomal’s oldest sons, George and Hari, worked as hawkers and sold precious stones and antiques, making ends meet during wars and occupations, until the second generation of Harilelas entered the tailoring business, making uniforms for British and American soldiers and opening stores throughout Asia. One of their largest shops was in the Imperial Hotel on Nathan Road, the first property the Harilelas bought in 1959.

But perhaps the most significant chapter of the Harilela family legacy, at least as it relates to the story of how The Hari came to be today, began in 1965, when Hari Harilela, then in his forties, bought a prime location in Kowloon to build what would become the flagship Holiday Inn Golden Mile. It got off to an ominous start, as Hong Kong entered one of its darkest periods with the riots of 1967. The Harilelas persisted, only to encounter one of the biggest typhoons in Hong Kong’s history, Typhoon Rose in 1971, which flooded the basement as it was being dug out by hand. “A lot of the external shareholders said, ‘You know what: time to leave; buy us out,’” Aron Harilela says. “But against most people’s advice, he still built this hotel.” The hotel would go on to contribute more than half of the company’s earnings at one point, making Hari Harilela such a legend that it should come as little surprise that the family is now working to turn his memoirs into a book with the writer Vaudine England.

“It sounds like an arrogant parallel to make, and I don’t mean it to be, but hold on, he opened his first hotel, built during the worst time in Hong Kong, and I’m opening the first hotel I’ve ever built in the worst time in Hong Kong, and it feels surreal, if that makes any sense, because I was that close to him,” Aron Harilela says. “It just feels like *déjà vu*.”

Since The Hari Hong Kong was first announced in 2015, he has seen the project evolve significantly from the original plan—even as architectural renderings were being finalised, the owner of a neighbouring building on Lockhart Road suddenly offered to sell that property, so the footprint was expanded. The old properties were torn down and a new building went up, topping out in April 2019, just a few weeks after a proposed extradition bill prompted a chain of protests that on many occasions filled the streets of Wan Chai with smashed glass and tear gas. Then came Covid-19, closing government offices for



several weeks and delaying permits and licences. And yet, he reflected, The Hari thus far remains on track for its 2020 opening.

"I was having this conversation with a cousin of mine, and I said, 'You realise that on the one hand, I'm talking to structural engineers about how this building has to be safe, I'm talking to the controller about numbers that we're taking to banks. And then on the other, I'm talking about the colour of toothpicks that will be in the restaurant,'" Harilela says.

Harilela has an eye for detail. You can see it in his style, which is very much reflected at The Hari London as it will be in Hong Kong. Tara Bernerd, who designed the interiors of both, seemed to encapsulate the essence of Harilela into the walls, the artwork, even the handsome, sporty, open spirit of the space. She once remarked on a tweed jacket he was wearing and said, "Yeah, we're going to do

it as a curtain." When he was at a loss for what to name a restaurant, she asked him the name of his favourite horse (Harilela is an avid polo player). Il Pampero it was.

A sense of personality is the mark of a great hotel, a place that gives a guest the feeling of comfort and belonging in someone else's home—something for which the Harilelas, famous for entertaining, are well known. That, and confidence. For Aron Harilela, who now has two young children of his own, Uma, 5, and Kiran, 3 (his marriage to Laura Sellati occasioned his last appearance on the cover of *Tatler Hong Kong* in February 2012), that's worth passing on.

"People are obviously worried," Harilela says. "But we'll be all right. My mother's excited about The Hari opening. Shame my father isn't here for it. When I was four years old, I cut the ribbon at his hotel. My son keeps asking me every day, 'Papa, can I go and cut the ribbon?'"

Above: Ermenegildo Zegna suit, Brunello Cucinelli T-shirt. Right: The interior designer Tara Bernerd has designed both The Hari locations

Har: Dennis Tsui (Grooming: Karen Yiu, Assistant: Karyl Li, all at HK Makeup Artist)

Image: Jason Allen (Bernerd)

A Touch of Personality

As the final pieces come into place at The Hari, interior designer Tara Bernerd, founder and CEO of Tara Bernerd & Partners in London, is overseeing a design project that brings her career full circle.

"There was a huge amount of nostalgia for me when I first visited the site," says Bernerd, who shares many opinions and tastes with Aron Harilela and has long enjoyed the up-and-coming nature of the Wan Chai neighbourhood. "My younger years in design led me constantly to look to Lockhart Road for various projects and seeing the change in the area over the years immediately ignited an excitement."

As she did with The Hari London, Bernerd says she sought inspiration from the architecture of the building, in this case newly constructed, its location and all the people around it. "We have designed the hotel to be something of an escape from the hustle and bustle of Wan Chai," she says. A mixture of mid-century and modern contemporary lobby furniture was chosen to offer different seating options, for intimate encounters or meetings and celebrations. Throughout the public spaces and guest rooms, the materials include a mix of marble, wood, bronze details and, behind the reception desk, "an eye-catching slatted timber wall lined with deep, rich, petrol blue suede inserts". The hotel will include a new Japanese restaurant concept, Zoku, where the ceiling is made of angled timber slats in origami-like forms that nod to the cuisine, while the interiors are more modern and playful with a palette of pink and



khaki velvet. Lucciola, an Italian restaurant on the first floor, is designed in a bold combination of amber and green, with a green and white encaustic tile floor inspired by the Italian countryside.

"Our approach to design is very much about the layers and attention to detail, those thoughtful touches that the guest didn't realise they needed but are so delighted to have," Bernerd says. "Although design plays a large part in this, a hotel is all about the people working there, the warmth, the service, and ultimately for me, creating a home that our guests continually desire to return to."