



## **SOFTROOM DESIGN FOR VIRGIN ATLANTIC UPPER CLASS**

Softroom have worked with the Virgin Atlantic design team to create a unique new business travel experience with an air of natural glamour.

Softroom were responsible for the overall design language and identity of the project, selected the fabrics and finishes throughout and created the new on-board bar.

The new cabin interiors feature revolutionary fully-flat beds and a unique bar-room, and are to be installed throughout the airline's fleet of Boeing 747-400 and Airbus A340-600 aircraft.

Softroom is a London-based architecture and design agency, with projects ranging from a restaurant at the Royal Albert Hall, to retail spaces for Selfridges as well as work for BBC Television and an award-winning belvedere in Kielder Forest national park.

They joined the project team in September 2001 after a competitive pitch process. The first stage of work followed a fairly open brief, covering all aspects of the Virgin Atlantic Upper Class product. Softroom developed ideas for seating, bars, luggage, amenity kits and the like, but of particular importance to the design managers at the airline was the need to find an overall design language. This language would inform all aspects of the creative process and ultimately set the tone of the passenger experience. Softroom's response was to select evocative imagery around a notion of 'natural glamour'.

### **Natural Glamour**

What exactly was meant by 'natural glamour'? Natural glamour is by definition an oxymoron, the two words seemingly contradicting each other; glamour is all about creating a seductive illusion through artifice...not at all 'natural'.

"The trick is to be able to cast the spell effortlessly, without appearing to try too hard. That's the sense we wanted to convey" remarks Christopher Bagot, a director of Softroom.

Rather than propose definite design solutions, they explored their thinking via illustrative montages and suggestive keywords, such as enchantment, comfort and stimulation. This helped to characterize the ambience they sought, as fellow Softroom director Oliver Salway explains, “We had in mind the uncontrived prestige of a London Taxi as opposed to the crass ostentation of a stretch limo. Laid-back, effortless sophistication. Not having to try too hard, because you’ve already made it.”

But there was another equally important aspect to natural glamour. This is the appeal and alchemy of natural phenomena. The magical atmospheric effects seen from 30,000ft, the allure of luminous mist through a dark forest, the shimmer of sunlight on water. These ideas were central in defining the palette of fabrics and finishes they hoped to utilize.

The upper-deck lounge of a 747 in the 1970s was the epitome of a naturally glamorous space. The chic communality it embodied suggests a rather more convivial way to travel than the latest tendency for (unattainable) isolation—the ‘cabin-within-a-cabin’. A happy balance needs to be found between the desire for personal space, and the reality of high-density modern business travel.

## **Design development**

Softroom started to investigate how the ideas of relaxed sociability within the aircraft might be attained. They drew on the analogy of ‘loungers around a hotel pool’, as an example of a luxurious space where you’re prepared to unwind, despite being in close proximity to your neighbouring guests.

“It was at this point that we spotted the potential of turning the seats around. By orienting the seats towards the aisles, away from the sidewalls and the centreline, we realised you could achieve the right combination of privacy and congeniality, without compromising the seat count. This must have struck a chord with our clients, as—unbeknownst to us—they had already arrived at precisely this innovative seating orientation themselves.”—Oliver Salway.

So far, Softroom had employed traditional board-based presentations, but in a change of tack they captured a one-minute ‘moment’ of airborne natural glamour on a DVD. Through a deliberately abstracted combination of computer animation and live-action video, they illustrated the mix of ingredients that could generate the atmosphere they wanted.

Although sketchy and suggestive, this clip proved to play an important role in informing the ultimate design and mood of the cabin proper. A great many aspects were retained in the final product. Alongside the new seating layout were shimmering surfaces, monolithic ‘monuments’, sparkling crystalline highlights, touches of Virgin red as accents and even a floating chandelier—all of which survived the many subsequent revisions to feature in the new Upper Class interior.

The Softroom team were invited to inspect the progress that the designers and engineers at Virgin Atlantic had made on the project. They already had in place the unique deployment mechanism that turns the seat into a fully-flat bed, and much of the seating layout had been determined.

Softroom specified the fabrics and finishes for the seating but were aware that another team would be working on the resolution of the seat itself. Given the complexity of the

project and its accelerated timescale, the decision to have separate teams concentrating their efforts on the cabin and seat respectively appears sound.

“When the curtain drew back to reveal Pearson Lloyd as the team selected to work on the seat design, it was clear that a happy interface between all our efforts could be achieved. In essence, for us as architects, the situation is no different to designing a restaurant where the client has expressed a strong desire for a particular dining chair. It’s a matter of incorporating this given element into a harmonious overall composition.”—Christopher Bagot

The design process was to spawn a myriad of options, as different demands and constraints were progressively introduced. The interior as flown is the result of a six-stage iterative process. Along the way feedback not just from the design team at Virgin, but also from crew, engineers and passengers was elicited. It was by no means a linear progression, as quite different variables were fed into the equation at different times.

## **The Bar**

A prime example of this cycle of revision was the development of the bar. For the first half of the programme, the idea of a simple block bar at the back of the cabin was pursued. It would be separated from the main seating area by a low perforated screen and communal lounge seating. By maintaining open lines of sight across the cabin, the room would have a lounge-like feel, with the barman cast as ‘maitre d’, his positioning not unlike that of a DJ overlooking a dancefloor.

“We wanted to empower the passengers to help themselves to refreshments, much as you would make use of a drinks table at a house party. This informality does much to communicate a sense of hospitality. It illustrates our belief that such simple freedoms can be more important in establishing a feeling of luxury than piling on ever-increasing degrees of pampering and service” says Christopher. The result was a restrained form, incorporating illuminated glass and bottle racks, equally accessible from the front of the bar as from the back.

The bar concept remained intact for some time, until it was called into question by consumer feedback. What the customer wanted was, as far as possible, a strong separation between the bar and the remainder of the cabin.

Softroom set about a series of rapid explorations into just about every conceivable way to squeeze a bar ‘room’ with a back-bar and stools into the limited floor area left over by the new seating layout. Although a very different proposition from the open lounge they had initially favoured, the ultimate version of the bar manages to satisfy the passengers’ wishes, while retaining the service/self-service functionality from the early studies. It is a good example of the contributions both of ‘blue-skies’ thinking and rigorous trialling.

## **Lighting**

Perhaps the most improbable survivor of the evolutionary development of the cabin was the chandelier. Softroom were trying to achieve a visual delicacy to the object. However, delicacy is not generally synonymous with the impact resistance requirements of an airliner. There is also a need that it houses overhead oxygen dropouts.

The final resolution is reminiscent of moonlight behind clouds. A two-tier casual grid of gold and silver tiles is backlit through reflection. Its appearance is extended by mirror panels applied to the end of the run of luggage bins and the cross-aisle bulkheads.

From their experience with their last major cabin refit, Virgin Atlantic are very aware of the potential for lighting to influence the mood inside the aircraft. Early on, Softroom established the principle of using subtle shifts in colour temperature to soften the lighting, with the express intention of making the passengers look good.

“Working with lighting consultancy DHA, we set up two key scenes, corresponding to the warm ‘golden hour’ before sunset and the gentle lavender hues you see at dusk. As the lighting system cycles through a large number of variations between these settings, the passenger remains visually suspended in a glamorous bubble of time” comments Oliver.

## **Fabrics and finishes**

The new Upper Class interior is an inherently sophisticated product, something Softroom wished to reflect in the choice of materials. The guiding principle was to maintain a sense of glamorous understated elegance, but without excluding the immediate appeal associated with Virgin.

Says Oliver, “We selected a base of rich neutrals, with eye-catching top notes. Drawing on our research into the fascination of atmospheric effects, we sought finishes that would have an unusual interaction with light”.

Curtains and padded bulkheads are of a soft silver fabric, with a seductive sheen. Painted surfaces, such as those found on the shield of the seat, the bar-back unit and cabinets, have a layer of metallic interference pigment. Like the paintwork of some sportscars, this refracts the light from certain angles, giving a magical shimmer as you change your view. These illusions are further enhanced by mirrored reflections and deep gloss lacquer.

“Of great importance was the question of how to make use of the colour red. Red, of course, is the signature colour of the Virgin group, yet it’s not an easy one to use in an interior. It had formed a main component of the previous incarnation of the Upper Class cabin, from which they felt the need to move on, but without losing the brand association.”— Christopher Bagot.

The attitude they adopted was to limit the application of the colour to specific ‘accents’, thereby heightening its impact. Like a dash of lipstick or the the vivid silk lining of a suit, it appears as flashes of colour inside wardrobe units and in the cavity of the ottoman to each seat, or as a hot tropical flower in a vase on the bar counter. While the majority of the carpeting is a rich aubergine hue, this changes to a radish red around the bar, underlining the brand association between Virgin, leisure and entertainment.

Each element of the palette was first sourced from conventional fabric suppliers, to act as a target in terms of handle and appearance. These were then matched to certified airworthy products as needed by the in-house team at Virgin Atlantic, together with specialist consultancy Park.

Perhaps the most contentious issue was the colour of the seat leathers. They wanted to avoid any overt associations—it should not be a ‘red leather chair’. Nor should it be too dull, as a brown colour might be. “Some contenders seemed very promising as swatches, but lost their appeal entirely when viewed under the lighting found in an aircraft cabin.” says Oliver.

After countless variations, they eventually settled on a dark purplish hue. Durable and warm, it successfully refers to the airline’s colourscheme and strikes the right note without being too brash.

## **Testing**

All along, each aspect of the design was rigorously tested. A wide variety of media were used, from simple sketches to full-scale mock-ups. Softroom’s own in-house skills in computer visualisation ensured that everyone right up to board level had a clear idea of the direction they were taking from the outset. Indeed, the results of the digital visuals were remarkably close to the finished products, often leading to an eerie (but reassuring) sense of *deja-vu*. This helped to ensure that the rapid sign-off on the budgets needed to avoid the project stalling were swiftly received.

## **Finishing Touches**

The finishing touch, a spark of glitter, made its entrance very late on as production approached. It was something that was in fact alluded to in the abstract animation made right the way back in the design process, but it had almost been forgotten. Softroom had filmed the dancing scintillations of light bouncing off crystals, with the idea of introducing a captivating, random element to the cabin environment.

Oliver Salway— “The answer came in the form of a mesh of Swarovski crystals, which we set into twin-needle-stitched leather panels, attached over mirror to the forward bulkheads of the cabin. Spotlit, they add just a little dash of ghetto-fabulous ‘bling-bling’ into the mix.”

As well as being a dream commission, the steep-learning curve of the project was a fascinating challenge. The very fact that it came into being at all is itself remarkable, given the background to its gestation. The last few years have not necessarily been the most auspicious time to take bold business moves, especially in the aviation sector. However, Virgin Atlantic kept their nerve and the programme on track throughout. The end-result is playful, sophisticated and innovative, driven by a common belief in the need to define a coherent and rich design language, which can act as both a focus and a goal during the long road of its development.

