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January 24, 2008

Design Thursday: What would a Mayan branding guru do?

In the middle of a cold, nasty January day, it's hard to resist the lure of a beachy vacation in Cancun --- even if the closest you can get is a meeting room in New York's Meatpacking District. So earlier this week I trudged over to the opening party for **Nizuc**, the latest hotel/condo/resort project by master hotelier **Adrian Zecha**, the head of tony Amanresorts and **GHM Hotels** (best known in North America as the company behind The Setai in South Beach.)

In the midst of a market meltdown, it's hard to talk about the need for yet another posh resort on the Riviera Maya, although this one has a particularly appealing provenance. Most recently, what will soon be Nizuc (it's scheduled to open in 2009) was the former retreat for Mexican presidents -- the Mexican Camp David. Situated on a gorgeous stretch of beach, just five miles from the Cancun airport, it manages to feel both remote and convenient -- a tough trick to pull off, but one that this place manages handily. (Full disclosure: I visited the building site while in Cancun last spring, so can attest to its attractions.)

But if you go back a few thousand years, the site was home to the Mayans, a highly advanced civilization whose ruins still dot the region. Among their many accomplishments, the Mayans developed one of the most sophisticated writing systems in Mezo-America, with over 800 glyphs and symbols. And that's where the New York-based design and branding firm Carbone Smolan began its brainstorming to create a symbol that would capture the essence of the resort's history and culture.

"We understood that Punta Nizuc was Mayan for "nose of the dog" " says co-founder Leslie Smolan.



"After researching the Mayan culture, and noting visual cues like anthropomorphic creatures with softly rounded, wave like forms, our sketch process and final logo incorporates both, evoking both dog and sea." Smolan shared her Nizuc mood board to show us the earlier incarnations of their ideas.

The logo also reflects the Mayan belief in the circular nature of the continuum of life -- birth, death, rebirth. So, Smolan says, the logo is designed to keep your eye moving around the mark.

It's a cool little bit of cultural conscription, and looks surprisingly authentic, even if its pedigree is more Manhattan than Mayan. Of course, a strictly New York interpretation of what "nose of the dog" would look like would probably be something cold and wet -- not the pictogram you'd want to represent a luxury a beach resort.



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