

# OLYMPUS 80 AT 80

WITH MANDARIN ORIENTAL HYDE PARK, LONDON  
JOHN NASSARI





**OLYMPUS**

80  
YEARS  
OLYMPUS  
CAMERAS



BLUECOAT

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With the 80th Anniversary of Olympus Cameras this year, photographer John Nassari, an Olympus Visionary for the legendary camera brand, approached us to celebrate this occasion, through individual portraits of colleagues at Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park, London.

This would culminate in a one off private exhibition at the hotel and a coffee table book showcasing these behind the scene shots of the comings and goings of life at Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park.

Over the past year, John has become part of our family and integrated himself in our daily everyday culture, capturing the heartbeat of life at the hotel through the lens. These 80 portraits that he has photographed, embraces the excellent talent pool we have here of individuals who are dedicated in bringing the very best in personalised service to our loyal guests. The resulting exhibition and book is a culmination of the trust we all shared and the great work of John and our colleagues.

On behalf of all of us here at Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park, we are so proud to be a part of this very special 80th Anniversary of Olympus Cameras.

Gérard Sintès



Your photography is a record of your living, for anyone who really sees.<sup>1</sup>

When John Nassari undertook to produce and curate a selection of 80 photographs to document the inner workings of Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park, London, simultaneously celebrating 80 years of Olympus cameras, he undertook to work with a freedom, not consciously following any trope, photographer, or documentary style. Committing to neither a ‘noisy, grainy’ black and white traditional approach, nor a highly saturated colour documentary style, his key criterion was that viewers should be looking at the people and not the hotel. To now try and situate the outcome within any particular photographic genre is perhaps contrary to this goal, yet, at the same time, such context helps to reveal the depth of his work, potentially otherwise missed, by a society so saturated with imagery of the docu-soap style.

If documentary photography developed during the American Civil War (1861-65) and took, as its primary focus, the landscapes of the Great West, it was photographers such as Jacob Riis (1849-1914) and Lewis Hine (1874-1940), a couple of decades later, who ‘took up the effort to explore the “wilderness” of the inner city.’<sup>2</sup> Half a century after them, Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004) helped develop the notion of street photography, along with his concept of the ‘decisive moment’. While documentary photography typically focuses on an on-going issue or story, street photography concentrates more on interesting moments of everyday life. Nassari’s project, then, falls between the two – narrating a bigger picture, precisely through the capturing of individual moments. Nassari, it might be said, has ‘taken up the effort to explore the “wilderness”’ of Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park, London.

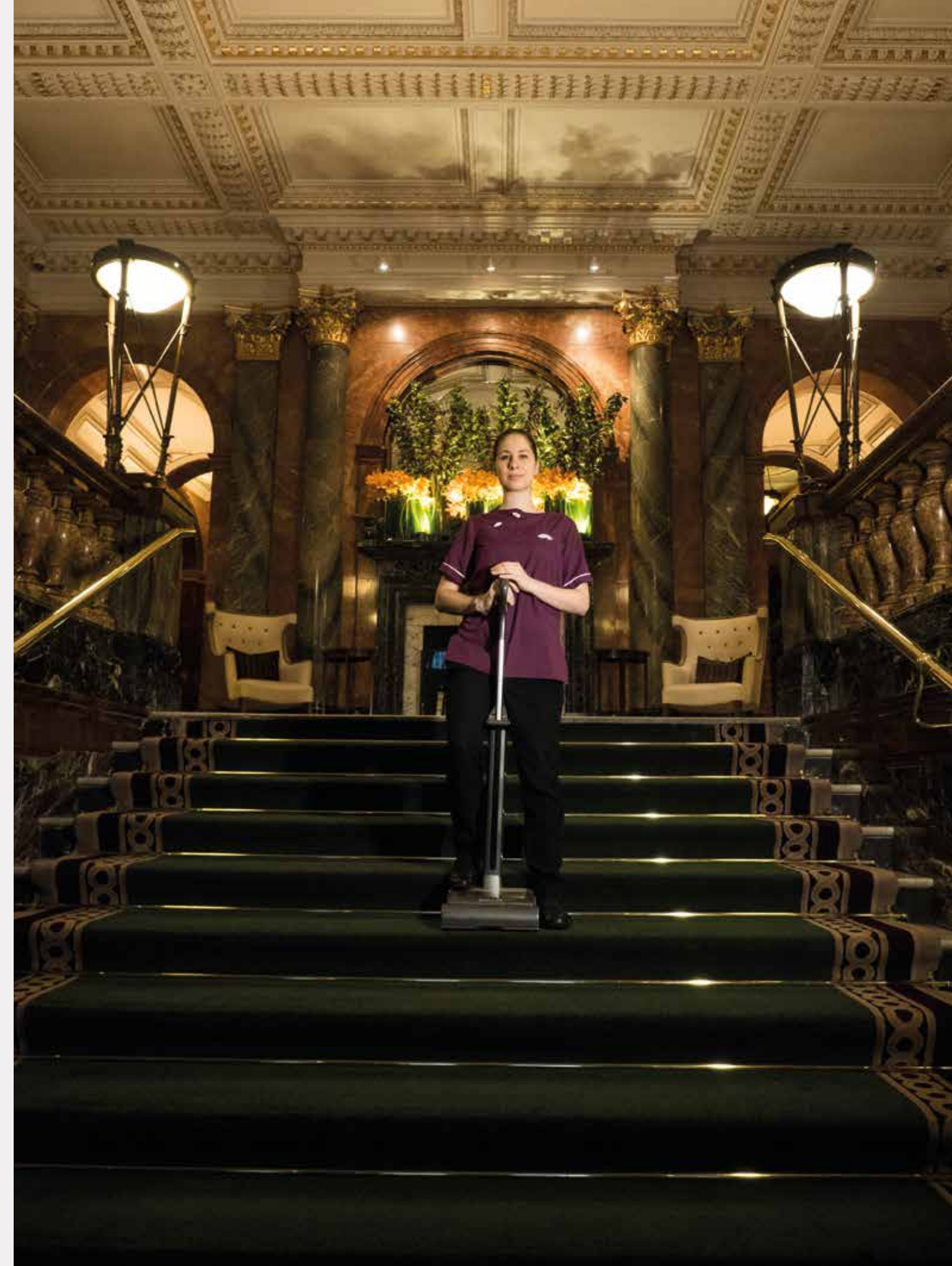
‘To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organisation of forms which give that event its proper expression,’ writes Cartier-Bresson of his decisive moment.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Nassari speaks of seeing each scene as a separate image, glued together by a common context, with each shot having its own components, requirements and constellations. For example, many of his back of house photographs have been rendered black and white at the post-production stage, reflecting the hustle and bustle and speed of that environment, where Housekeeping Assistants, Chefs, Kitchen Porters and Room Attendants could not be interrupted while at work; the front of house, public spaces, on the other hand, he describes as ‘a piece of theatre’, with ‘very high standards of presentation’, with ‘precision and formality’, lending themselves more to a colour format.





Nassari's photographs undeniably document the life and workings of the hotel, but, at the same time, they are not clear cut, sharply focused documentary images. Be it a 360° panoramic sweep, the blur of movement or a tastefully placed branch of foliage, they are infused with a sense of personality, not just of the persons depicted, but of the artist himself. Drawing on both his art and commercial practices, as well as his teaching, Nassari has produced a condensation of the light and elegance of advertising and the reality of documentary. Alongside Cartier-Bresson, he cites his influences as Irving Penn (1917-2009), Richard Avedon (1923-2004), Garry Winogrand (1928-84), Dennis Stock (1928-2010), Don McCullin (b1935), Jeff Wall (b1946), Nan Goldin (b1953) and Martin Schoeller (b1968). He doesn't mention Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), whose photograph *Steerage* (1907) has often been identified as one of the first really important documentary photographs. Stieglitz himself attributed the significance of his work, in contrast to the artistically sophisticated but socially unconcerned photography of contemporaries such as Edward Weston (1886-1958), to the bringing together of a fine art aesthetic with a socially relevant subject matter.<sup>4</sup> While Mandarin Oriental might not exactly be seen as 'socially relevant subject matter', there is certainly an element of social interest and reportage that distinguishes Nassari's project from pure art photography.

In her 1992 essay, as well as someone entering 'a situation of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay, or combinations of these and saving us the trouble', Martha Rosler describes the documentary photographer as someone, who, 'like the astronauts, entertained us by showing us the places we never hope to go.'<sup>5</sup> Ten months of no-holds-barred access to all departments of an international luxury hotel certainly fits the latter bill. During this time, Nassari was treated as 'an inside outsider – always with warmth but not exactly one of them' – and given unprecedented access from which to observe and experience the various hotel departments. As Susan Sontag notes: 'Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it.'<sup>6</sup> While still remaining objective, Nassari – and his work – perhaps unwittingly became a piece of the Mandarin Oriental complex.







In presenting the people above the establishment itself, Nassari sought to do so with dignity, photographing everyone as equals – from a Housekeeping Assistant standing proudly on the front steps, to the General Manager working late at night at his desk – a sense of pride pervades. It is this focus on personalities that represents, in Barthes' terms, the punctum of Nassari's project. While straight documentary photography is often of the studium type, portraying its subject matter neutrally, attracting only polite interest, Nassari's images, be it through a particular expression, a gesture, an angle, a reflection – some human aspect that 'pricks' and 'bruises' the viewer<sup>7</sup> – offer more than this. Capturing both Barthes' punctum and Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment, they grab the viewer and draw him in, making him too a piece of the Mandarin Oriental complex and this behind the scenes social document: a record of the hotel's living, for those who really see.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Strand (1923) *The Art Motive in Photography* in *The British Journal of Photography*, vol 70, pp612-15

<sup>2</sup> James Curtis (2003) *Making Sense of Documentary Photography*, History Matters: The US Survey Course on the Web, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/Photos/> [accessed 1 February 2016]

<sup>3</sup> 'Photographier: c'est dans un même instant et en une fraction de seconde reconnaître un fait et l'organisation rigoureuse de formes perçues visuellement qui expriment et signifient ce fait.' Henri Cartier-Bresson (1952) *The Decisive Moment*. New York: Simon and Schuster

<sup>4</sup> See Lewis Bush (2013) *What is Documentary Photography?* Blog post on Disphotic, <http://www.disphotic.com/7913what-is-documentary-photography/> [posted 10 October 2013; accessed 1 February 2016]

<sup>5</sup> Martha Rosler (1992) *In, Around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)* in Richard Bolton (ed) *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press

<sup>6</sup> Susan Sontag (1978) *On Photography*. London: Allen Lane

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes (1980/2000) *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. London: Vintage Books











































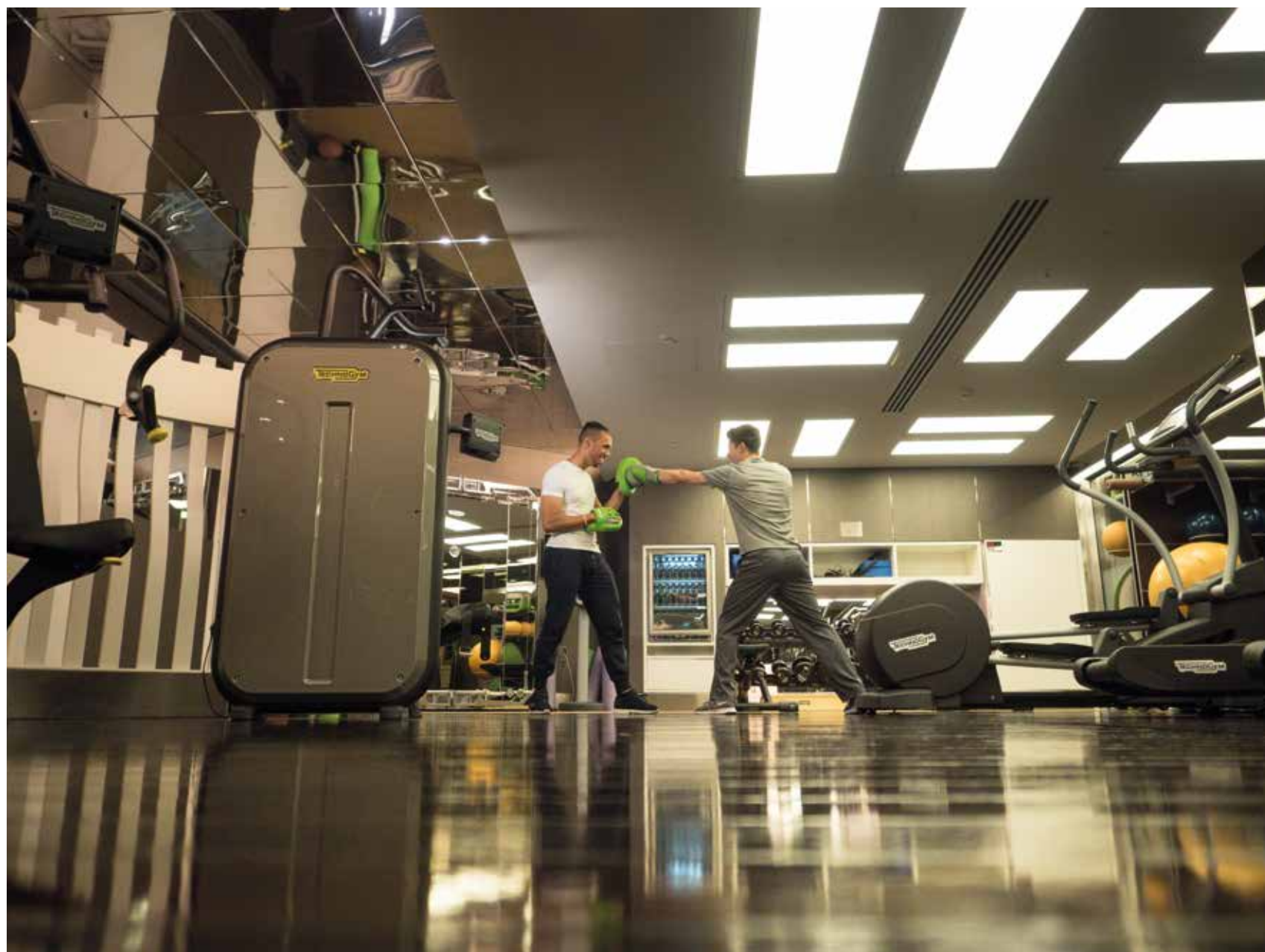
































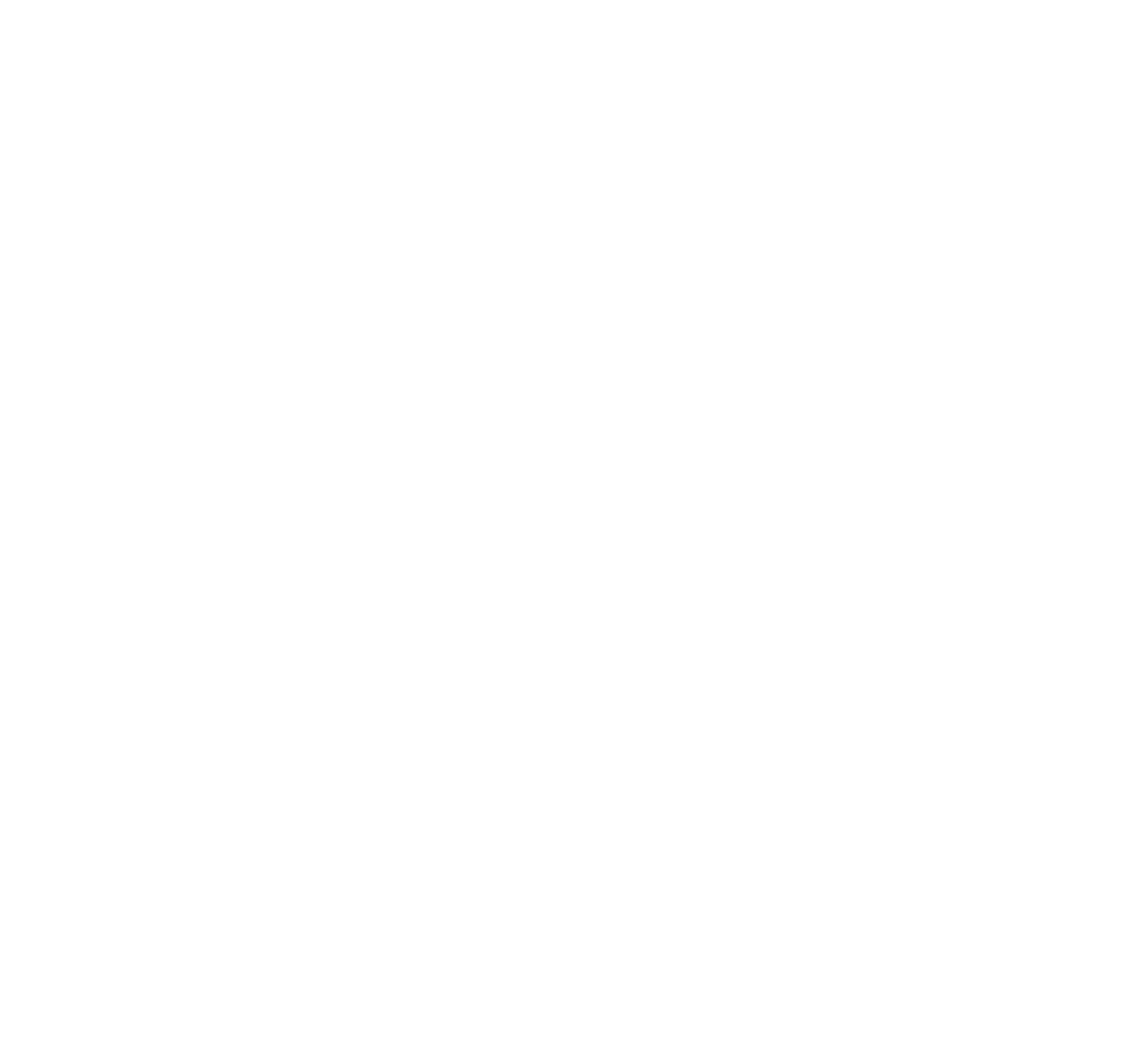






























































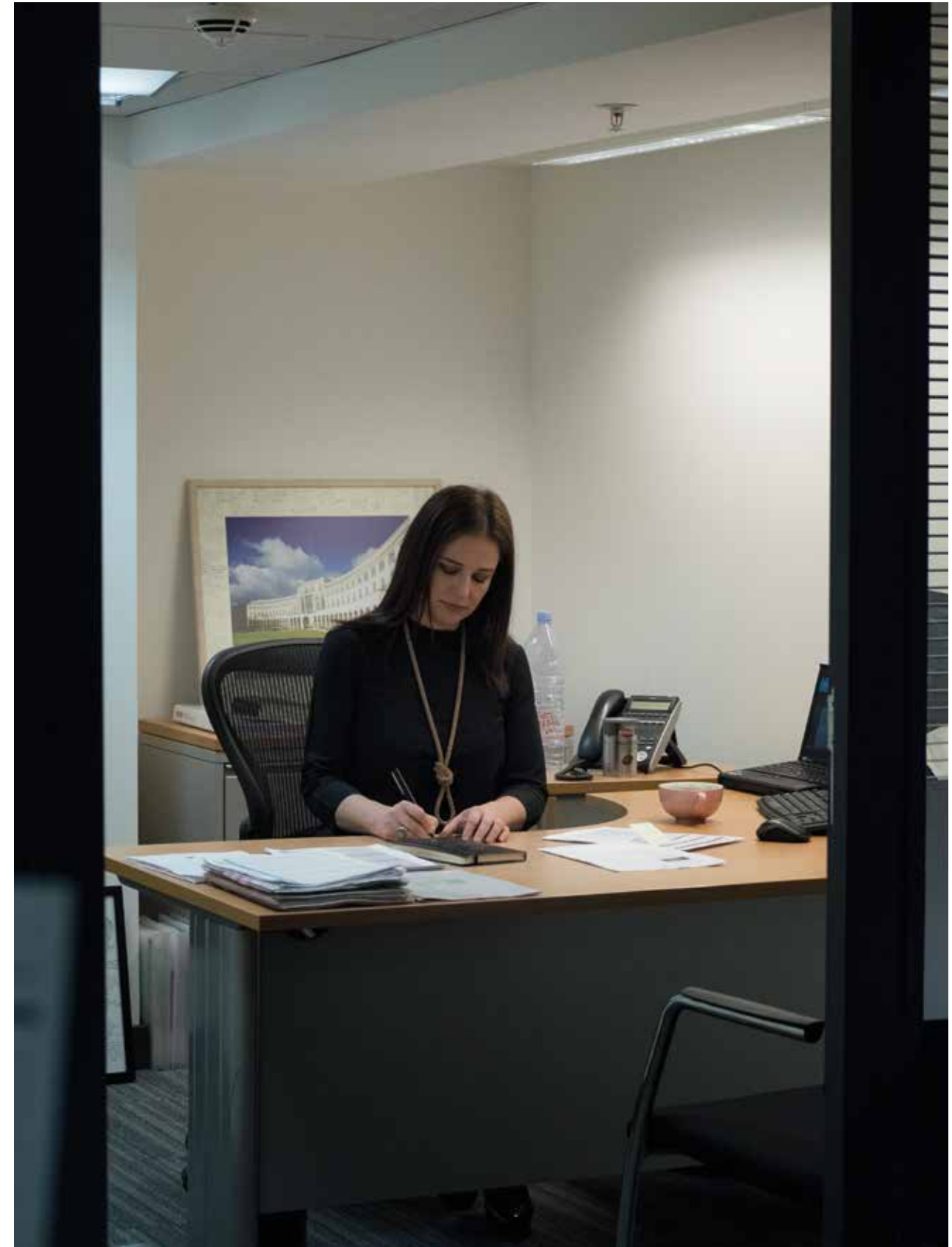




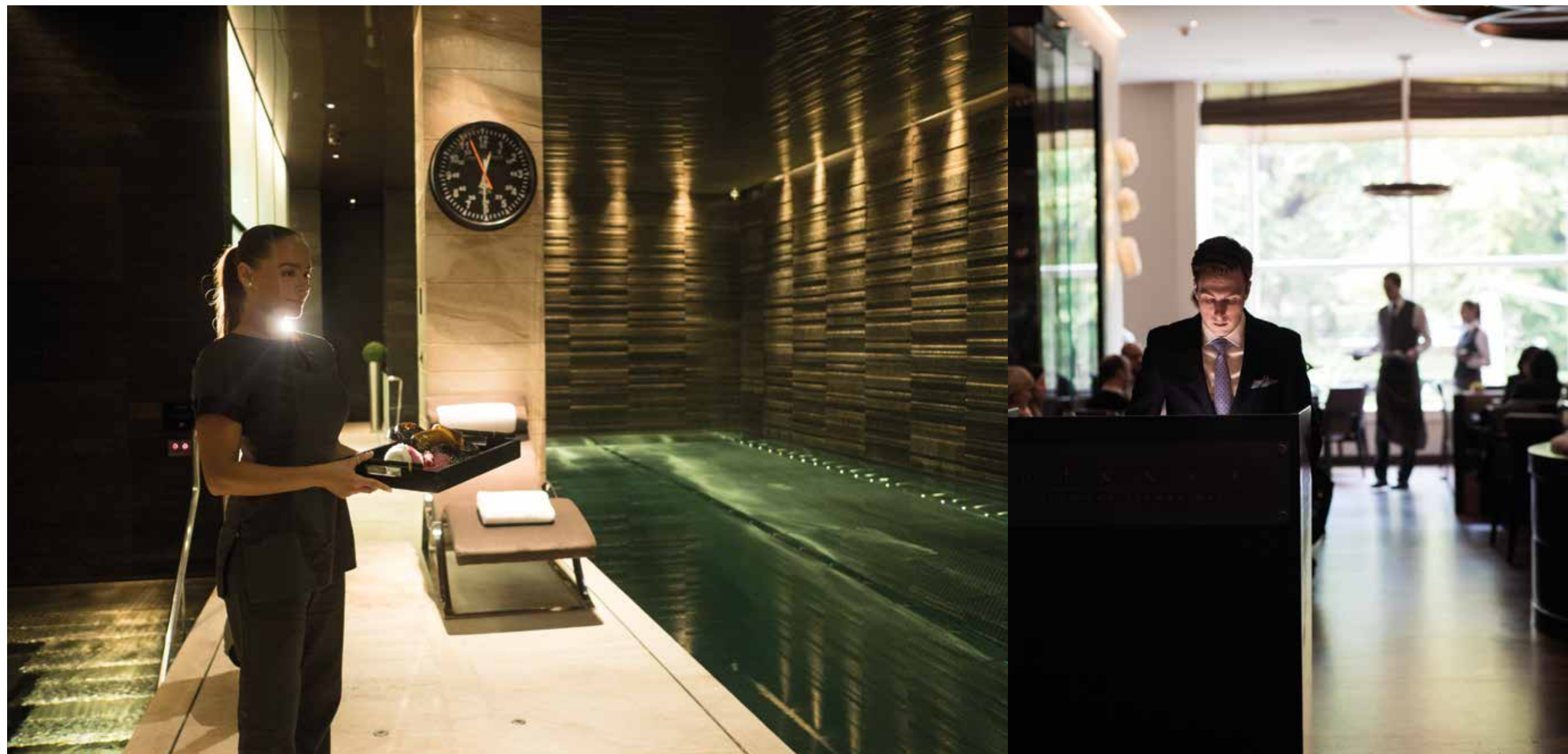




























John Nassari



The idea of photographing Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park London started in 2011. Sarah Cairns, Director of Communications, presented a backstage project to me then and I was immediately inspired by the idea. The project didn't happen at that time, but the idea stayed with me and captured my imagination. Over the last few years we have seen a number of luxury London hotels open their doors to journalists and film crews shooting documentary and docu-soap style forms, allowing viewers to discover the inner workings and often complex inter-personal structures of modern city hotels.

While these forms have their traditions in documentary filmmaking they appear at the same time to overlap marketing and PR genres, a sort of synergy between promotions and documentary. I was interested in what could be achieved from a traditional photo documentary project. If I were able to immerse myself over a long period of time what would the outcome be? What could I discover about the complex network of peoples, the interconnecting departments, the front and back of house, and the administrative and service areas – and how they all converge.

I wanted to undertake a project that explored both the luxury and glamour of hotel life and the raw, unending hard work of it. With Olympus celebrating 80 years of cameras in 2016 the project resulted in an undertaking of 80 photographs to celebrate 80 years.

The project took place over 10 months in 2015. I was first inducted into the hotel as a member of staff would. I took a training day with new colleagues arriving that month, then given a pass and a Mandarin Oriental fan badge, introduced to heads of departments and their colleagues. Just orientating myself into the bowels of the hotel took time; the maze-like corridors and short cuts up and down the hotel were complex to remember.

While the hotel would liaise with me about what departments I would work in each time I was in, they would do that without guidance or instruction on how I should conduct the work. Being a 24-hour business the project took place over 24 hours. Sometimes I would shoot the night teams, the breakfast set-ups at 5am, and the unloading of goods

into the loading bays at the basement of the hotel. Other times my work took place in office hours, shooting reservations, switchboard and afternoon tea.

There was only one criterion: no guests.

It was a wonderful experience working with Olympus and Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park London – an enthusiasm for the everyday, that was built and based on trust, a chronicle of the routine that concentrated on both authenticity and the aesthetics.

Many people have contributed to the development of the work which I am extremely grateful. I have been truly lucky to have the support of Mark Thackara at Olympus, who helped me put the project together and strengthen the partnerships. Thanks also to Claire Voyle and Estelle Sexton at Olympus for their support in putting the final stages of the exhibition, launch and book together. I am so thankful to Gerard Sintes for allowing me the opportunity to make his hotel my home for the past 10 months. Special mention must go to Sarah Cairns for proposing the idea to me in 2011, and for her unending enthusiasm and support throughout the project. Thanks also to Peter Burbidge – my main go-to – who helped me navigate the complicity of the hotel and for offering advice and setting up my time in all the departments, alongside Francesca Lindberg who was a great help. A thank you also goes to Marie Norrington and Chris Thompson for their continuing support. Andy Ellis has done a fabulous job designing this book, to which I am truly grateful. I am very thankful to the exhibition partners Armorial, David Robertshaw, Smoking Gun Event Design and Production, and especially Melanie Helen at Cranberry Blue Weddings. A mention also goes to Nicola Russill-Roy who has always had my interest at heart. Most of all I would like to thank all the wonderful colleagues at the hotel, who I have had the pleasure of getting to know in person over the last 10 months, to whom this work is dedicated.



John Nassari

John Nassari first became interested in photography at the tender age of 13 when is stepfather gave him his first camera. After earning a HND in Advertising Photography from Medway College in 1991, he pursued a career in advertising and editorial photography.

John followed the academic path throughout much of his career. He completed an MA in Visual Culture at Middlesex University in 1998, followed by a PhD at the University of East London in 2007, and spent many years teaching photography and media at university level. His photography projects have seen him working on a number of socially engaged projects, working with refugees and young people around the world.

Working closely with the British Council, John curated exhibitions on identity from 1998-2004, exhibiting in the UK and around the world. He exhibited in a joint show “Into the Open”, at Four Corners Gallery in 2008. His work has been seen in prestigious galleries such as the Pantheon Gallery, Cyprus, The Town House Gallery, Egypt, and the National Portrait Gallery, London.

In addition to exhibiting worldwide, John has also competed for a number of well-known accolades. In fact, John has been selected to exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery on three separate occasions while vying for the prestigious Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize. He was also named runner up in the Events Photography Awards 2014, and has had many awards for his wedding photography with the WPJA.

John's diverse career has cultivated his unique ability of capturing moments and emotions in beautiful ways, a skill that perfectly translates into his wedding photography. He launched a ground breaking 360° multi-media interactive photography service which was showcased in October 2014. An exclusive preview is currently available on his website.

John became an Olympus Visionary in September 2014.

