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Hotels: Differentiating with Design

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Implications

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A Newsletter by Informedesign. A Web site for design and human behavior research.



Renaissance Bath. Extra vanity space and a residential feel upgrade this hotel bathroom.

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Hotels: Differentiating with Design

It wasn't that long ago that most people would describe a hotel by talking about its location, or the level of service they received during their last visit, or the nice views of the beach or mountains from their room. But in recent years, the design of the hotel itself has been gaining a great deal of attention both from customers and from the press. More and more hotels use design and style as a way of differentiating themselves from other properties or brands, and as a way of attracting an affluent and socially active clientele. This makes sense; hotels want to generate word of mouth advertising - "buzz" - in a crowded and very competitive marketplace, and bold design is one effective way to accomplish this. Many hotel companies are following the example of W Hotels (part of the Starwood Hotel Group) by strongly emphasizing unique and cutting-edge design as a brand identifier.

Traditional Approach

Despite all the recent attention on design-driven properties, the fundamentals of hotel design have not altered much in the past 50 years. Guestrooms are still grouped together in configurations that allow for easy access and efficiency, while public areas and support

functions are consolidated below and to one side of the guestroom tower or block to allow for long-span spaces and operational efficiencies. For most properties, guestrooms and associated support spaces such as corridors and elevators make up anywhere from 65-90% of the total building area, and back-of-the-house functions take up between 10-15%. The balance of the hotel's area is dedicated to lobby spaces, restaurants and bars, recreational and fitness facilities, and meeting space. Quantities and shapes of such features are dictated largely by the market the hotel is intended to serve, the limitations of the site, and the needs of the hotel brand or management company.

Change is Underway

One aspect of hotel design that is changing is the size of hotel guest facilities. At many newly built properties, guestrooms are getting wider to permit more dramatic and flexible furniture arrangements and to give guests a better sense of value. On the other hand, the popularity of adaptive reuse of older buildings in the "boutique" hotel market is creating much smaller rooms than are typical, and often in shapes that are dramatically different from the 12' x 26' rectangle that has been the industry standard since the 1950s. Oddly shaped rooms



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represent interesting opportunities but pose unquestionably difficult problems for the designer.

Guestroom design still focuses on a few core functions: a sleeping zone that also permits television viewing from bed; a working area that supports laptop use; a full bathroom; and a dressing area with storage space for folded and hanging clothes. In most hotel configurations, the bathroom is located at the front of the room and back-to-back with the bathroom of an adjacent room to share plumbing. However, some designers are beginning to break away from this model. The Opus Hotel in Vancouver, Canada, and the Hotel on Rivington in New York City both positioned some of their guest baths on exterior walls, providing views for the guest and also for those on the street or in adjacent buildings. (Needless to say, these two hotels are attempting to attract a less traditional market segment!)

Guest expectations are pushing for more luxury in the bathroom, even at midscale properties. Four- and five-fixture baths are becoming the norm, as are curved shower bars, high-pressure showerheads, long vanities, and wall-mounted storage space.

In the working areas of the guestroom, guests are demanding more ergonomic furniture. Fully adjustable task chairs are increasingly common at guest desks, and high-quality mattresses are being included at even mid-scale properties such as Wingate Inns. Along with this is a move toward better lighting that is adjustable to permit easy viewing of a laptop screen as well as adequate light for grooming. Kimpton Hotels is adding rooms specifically designed for the tall guest with extra-long beds and raised showerheads.

In the public spaces, changes in both the competitive environment and in how guests use these spaces are dictating a change of course by hotel designers. The generic and uninspired “three-meal” restaurant off

the lobby is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. Designers are now either creating more unique dining settings in an effort to capture local markets as well as guest business, or are electing to forgo the full-service restaurant altogether—using the space for a quick service concept like Starbucks or for more profitable retail space instead. The familiar front desk is also changing as self-service kiosks and, eventually, hand-held terminals allow the check-in and checkout functions to break free of a fixed mill-work element.



W Seattle Lobby. More like the living room in a SoHo loft than a hotel lobby, this represents the aim of designers to create a cutting-edge feeling in the public spaces of hotels.

Current designs for hotel public spaces reflect that guests are using these lobbies, bars and restaurants to socialize and conduct business more than ever before. One hotel chain has adopted the upscale residential idea of a great room, combining social space, work areas, and casual dining all in the same area, allowing all of these functions to take place simultaneously. More homelike furnishings and décor are also coming to the fore; cutting edge hotel designers are taking their cues from shelter magazines as well as from industry specific publications. The ubiquity of cell phones is eliminating the need for a bank of house phones or payphones in the lobby, and designers are having to add more seating groupings in pub-

lic areas to facilitate conversation. Interestingly, it appears that cell phone users often prefer to walk around while in conversation—good hotel lobby design needs to adapt to allow for this added “flow.”

Applied Aesthetic

In terms of atmospherics, hotels need to provide a balance between engaging and stimulating public spaces and comfortable, more homelike guestrooms. Designers have been playing with color and light to create excitement that can be quickly and inexpensively changed as trends come and go. The St. Martin’s Lane Hotel in London even permits guests to control the color of the light emitted from their guestrooms, creating an ever-changing light show on the building’s façade. Another hotel brand is experimenting with massive photo murals on one wall of each guestroom that change with the seasons: irises in spring, blueberries in summer. It remains to be seen whether these dramatic and highly stimulating approaches to hotel design will be embraced by the market and thus spread throughout the industry, or if they will be quickly replaced by the “next cool thing” that travelers demand. Wise designers are emphasizing bold design elements that can be readily changed at minimal cost, such as paint, lampshades, or window treatments.

While styles and design solutions vary substantially, what remains clear is that guests have high expectations for their physical experience during a hotel stay, and that they will happily shop among competing hotels to get what they want from the environment. The pace of change continues to accelerate, and hotel designers are stretching boundaries to meet market demands within owners’ budgets.

What Guests Notice

As the design of hotel lobbies, restaurants, and guestrooms becomes more of a focus for the customer, designers and operators are in many cases having to

increase spending on furniture, fixtures, and equipment to keep up with trends and meet or exceed customer expectations. For a 300-room hotel, even a small design upgrade to a typical guestroom can translate into a substantial investment for the hotel owner. If companies are spending so much money on design-driven hotels, it stands to reason that understanding which design features are noticed by guests would be important.

To get at this question, we recently worked with the management of a 150-room, full-service hotel to identify guests who were willing to participate in a pilot photo-elicitation study. Guests who participated were asked to photograph any physical element in the hotel that made an impression on them, which we then used as a starting point for discussion in a follow-up interview. The photographs helped the guests articulate hotel design issues that were important to them.

While there was no clear consensus among the guests as to what design features were most important, many chose to illustrate design decisions that corresponded to a home-like (as opposed to commercial or institutional) environment. Guests also appreciate elements that represented forethought about their comfort or well-being, or that reinforced the hotel’s sense of place. Examples included patterned lampshades in a public corridor that showed a bit more flair than was expected; carefully placed soap dishes in the tub/shower combination that were easy to



Elevated soap dish within shower area.

reach from a standing position; and artwork above the beds and elsewhere in the room that reflected the community in which the hotel was located.

Virtually all the guests who had rooms on the west side of the building took an image of the view from their guestrooms (which was particularly striking at this property) and commented on how valuable that view was to their overall experience. The east-facing rooms had a much less interesting view, and no guest submitted an image from this vantage point.

Guests also took images of features that, while functional, reduced the quality of the experience. More than one guest noticed a tangle of electrical cords at an overloaded duplex receptacle, while others noted that while the provision of a telephone in the bathroom was a nice idea, its placement resulted in its handset being inadvertently knocked off whenever the toilet was used. Blank walls where in-room artwork should have been also caught the guests' attention, as did the absence of counter space near a mirror, which prevented female guests from comfortably applying makeup while the main vanity space was in use by a spouse.



Visible cords in guestroom.

About 20% of the images that guests took represented perceived service failures (or, less commonly, successes): a poorly vacuumed room, objects left behind by other guests, unemptied ashtrays, a malfunctioning armoire door. Guests looked behind furniture, opened cabinet doors (even on furnishings in public spaces!), and in one case examined the ceiling, indicating that

attention to detail in both hotel design and maintenance is crucial in order to meet increasing expectations.



About the Authors:

Stephani Robson holds a Master of Science degree (1999) in Human-Environment Relations from the Department of Design and Environmental Analysis at Cornell. Ms. Robson is currently on the faculty at the Hotel School, teaching hotel and restaurant development and design courses.

Her academic interests center on how environments affect behavior, with a particular focus on hospitality settings. Ms. Robson is actively researching restaurant design psychology, and has been published in a variety of academic and industry publications. A native of Vancouver, Canada, she also has extensive experience as a food service designer.

Madeleine Pullman is an associate professor at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration. She received her BS from Evergreen State College and her MS, MBA and Ph.D. from the University of Utah. Before teaching at the School of Hotel Administration, Dr.



Pullman was an assistant professor in the College of Business at Colorado State University. Currently, her teaching focuses on service operations management

and creating and managing for service excellence. Her primary research focus is related to experience design and customer loyalty.

Additional Resources

—Collins, D. (2001). *New Hotel: Architecture and Design*. Conran Octopus: London.

—Phillips, P. (2004). Customer-oriented hotel aesthetics: A shareholder value perspective. *Journal of Retail and Leisure Property*, 3(4), 365-.

—Rutes, W., Penner, R., & Adams, L. (2001). *Hotel Planning, Design and Development*. W.W. Norton: New York.

—www.hoteldesigns.co.uk

Web site with extensive reviews, images, and other materials related to current hotel design; emphasis on European hotels.

Related Research Summaries

InformeDesign has many Research Summaries about hotel design and related, pertinent topics. This knowledge will be valuable to you as you consider your next design solution and is worth sharing with your clients and collaborators.

“Design Elements Can Increase Hotel’s Bottom Line”
—*Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*

“Creating Loyal Hotel Customers”
—*Journal of Hospitality and Leisure Marketing*

“Perception of Luxury in Hotels” —*Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*

“Hotel Design for Seniors”
—*International Journal of Hospitality*

“ADA Concerns in Assembly Spaces of Public Buildings”
—*Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*

“Benefits of Restorative Environments”
—*Journal of Environmental Psychology*

“Enhancing Marketplace Accessibility for the Visually Impaired”
—*Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*

“Changes in the Resort Industry”
—*Journal of Hospitality and Leisure Marketing*

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Marriott Corporation; used with permission (Renaissance Bath, p. 1)

W Hotels Worldwide; used with permission (W Seattle Lobby, p. 2)

Stephani Robson, Cornell University (bath and guestroom, p. 3 & 4)



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