

**HBR** Feature Focus

Discussions on Emerging Growth Markets



Mr. Imerlishvili

*Architecture & Design***Distinctive Elements in Hotel Design.  
Should We Bother?***By [Ira Imerlishvili](#), Lead Designer / Senior Associate, DiLeonardo**Co-Authored by [Lia DiLeonardo](#), Partner DiLeonardo*

What makes hotel design unique? Is it grand staircases, spectacular chandeliers, awe-inspiring art collection? Today, it seems that hotels try to outdo each other by investing in distinctive design features. Why has there been this noticeable shift brand thinking? Some might say investing in design for design sake, but is this the case? Is it worth the time, effort and money? Brand Identity and lifestyle brands were an important genesis for differentiation in the hospitality segment, however,

this has evolved to be a competition of sorts with many vying for the coveted spot of the being the must see property in the market. This in turn, helps generate "the buzz", the best and most glowing reviews, which in turn hopefully lead to greater occupancy.

**Get Them Talking**

There are a number of reasons, and each brand has their own arguments, for spending often considerable parts of budgets on design elements that will make them stand out of the crowd. Distinction has, and will always be, a driving factor in winning guest loyalty and reaching new markets. Service, as well as design, plays a critical role in creating distinction in an authentic, timeless and responsible manner. It is through creative design that hotels become part of the fabric of their communities and in the best cases, cultural centerpieces of a destination. In the future, it would seem that as new urban centers develop, the line between what is hotel, entertainment, and/or culture may continue to be blurred creating great opportunity for distinct elements that create destinations in themselves.

Some brands feel that the more unique the design, the more memorable the guest experience is. Striking design elements like astonishing staircases, art in public spaces and others often compensate for the rest of design that, while of high quality, may be less of an eye-catcher. Hotel business is all about exceeding guests' expectations. Often, extraordinary design elements surprise guests, giving them an opportunity to experience something unique and exceed their expectations. That obviously may result in higher satisfaction ratings, but in our "connected world," it also generates the very much desired positive word of mouth. It may take form of images shared via Instagram, photo posts on Facebook, or photo tweets. It will also be something reviewers can point out in their hotel reviews and recommendations. Simply putting, unique design elements give people something to talk about, which is an old PR strategy, after all.

## Brand Identity



Distinctive design elements can strengthen identity of a hotel brand. Some brands create lists of “must-have” design elements that may be designed uniquely for each property, but also to a certain extent, they are standardized and recognizable across the brand portfolio. An example of this is St. Regis’ list of “must-haves” in its standard guidelines including a grand staircase in the main lobby, chandeliers serving as a central monumental piece in a lobby ceiling, as well as a signature mural at a St. Regis’ bar. Without seeing the hotel’s logo, guests know they are in St. Regis hotel. The brand experience is highlighted in hotel’s public spaces.

This is an important strategy, as well as tool, for designers to employ when starting research and the design process. Too often, hotel spaces fail a blindfold test. Their lobbies look just like a lobby in any other hotel chain. When no distinctive design element is distinguishing the hotel from its competition, the hotel brand can easily disappear from guests’ memory along with other travel experiences. Nowadays, even less exposed travelers seek after hotels that are different in look and feel.

A more recent and welcomed strategy in brand identity is the effort to not only set apart a brand, but also a regional specificity to culturally sensitive design. For example, traveling globally, one understands that there is a real and perceived difference from a Sheraton property in the United States versus a Sheraton property in China.

## Ties to Local Culture

As hotel guests look for authentic experiences and opportunities for interaction with local culture, hotels strive to reflect that culture in space design. That is another way distinctive design elements enhance guests' experiences. Cultural relevance can be brought in by works created by local artists and prominently displayed in public spaces, or by design elements inspired by local history, architecture or nature. All of this is done without losing the personality of the brand.

An example of this can be seen when looking at a strategy of one brand, which stays locally relevant by devoting part of its lobby to an "experience gallery." This is where art works referring to local culture set up sense of the location. In the case of the Hilton in Manila, Philippines which is currently in a design phase, the "experience gallery" introduces guests to local art of weaving baskets. Using this old technique, a local artist weaved cocoon-like shapes and attached them to tree branches. This exhibition was not an after-thought; it was created as a permanent element of the overall design. This part of public area was designed specifically to incorporate the exhibition. It created a one of a kind space much like of an art museum.

Another example is a five-star hotel in Qatar that was insistent that its design reflects the unique local nature. A design firm proposed a distinctive design element located in the most visible part of the hotel that was heavily relating to local nature. Two spiral staircases intertwined with each other and rising up to an atrium were inspired by horns of a local animal, Arabian Oryx.



*Main feature of the lobby at five star hotel in Qatar.*

Distinctive design elements of a hotel serve many purposes. They strengthen a brand's identity going beyond marketing collateral and signage. They can also positively surprise and create memorable experiences that guests often find worth sharing with other travelers. They give media and guests something to talk about, often spinning positive word of mouth. Often these features are bespoke to the location, hotel surroundings and related culture. Time invested in research and creation of these elements may be intense, but results are rewarding.

## **Guest Experience**

Lobbies and Public space are a natural choice for one of a kind design features and memorable design moments but how can this translate into unique features for the guestroom. Guestroom design is often driven by functional, durability and quantity/mass production. If the intent is to focus on unique guest experience, the operator who can capture this emphasis on design and culture in the room will capture the guest's attention and enthusiasm for the brand over a sustained period of time. This is one reason why room design often takes precedent in project sequencing.

One important approach is custom pieces that are designed and manufactured using local techniques, designs and influences. In regions around the world, textile design is often a highly valued and inherently regional art form that can be "woven" into a design story. Color palette, pattern and material inform the overall aesthetic of the room. This is translated into carpet design as well.

Case pieces can take inspiration from sourcing of local materials as well as construction techniques. In a recent project in Sri Lanka, designers worked to take a local wood to create signature pieces for guestroom design which included a desk crafted from hand hewn planks of the wood, each original and specific to the guestroom.

## **Distinction in the Details**

Small, but important details that enhance the user experience should not be overlooked or overshadowed by the "wow" effects of major public space installations. It's the small details that are equally impressive and as important to execute to complete the overall design story. For example, handcrafted Koran stands in each room for a project in Medina, Saudi Arabia. The stand itself is a reference to the large Masharabia patterns created on the exterior of the building. These help to unify the design language of the property. In Asia, a desk whose drawers are lined with a custom designed fabric that reflects color and pattern of overall room design.

Moments like these that get the guest talking. It is going the extra mile to create and imprint the memory, and as an added bonus garner great reviews on Trip Advisor.

Essential to understanding if time and capital investment is "worth it" is a fundamental understanding of a properties market and targeted guest. As discussed above in relation to guest room design, distinction may not always be driven by large budget, high visual impact. The discreet, highly functioning and subtle design solutions can also create a bespoke and seemingly flawless guest experience that will garner the most loyal guests. Designers in hospitality learn quickly that bedding, attention to light leakage in blackout drapery, well placed data and electrical outlets, the seemingly mundane items are the elements that make a property work. Without these, no grand stair, chandelier or art collection will make a lasting impact. So there-in lies the crux, big impact verses fundamentals. Both are essential.

Distinction has, and will always be, a driving factor in winning guest loyalty and reaching new markets. Service, as well as design, plays a critical role in creating distinction in an authentic, timeless and responsible manner. It is through creative design that hotels become part of the fabric of their communities and in the best cases, cultural centerpieces of a destination. In the future, it would seem that as new urban centers develop, the line between what is hotel, entertainment, and/or culture may continue to be blurred creating great opportunity for distinct elements that create destinations in themselves



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Mr. Imerlishvili brings with him 15 years of experience in hospitality design including high-end urban and resort hotels, restaurants, golf clubs and residential interiors all over the globe. He shares his extensive design experience by mentoring other fellow designers who admire his unique design style and project management skills. As a Lead Designer / Senior Associate, Mr. Imerlishvili leads teams through the design process from inception of the concept, through the development stages, straight through to the completion and installation. Mr. Imerlishvili can be contacted at 401-732-2900 or [iimerlishvili@dileonardo.com](mailto:iimerlishvili@dileonardo.com) ***Extended Bio...***