STAY FOCUSED

Current Trends in Hospitality Design Are Blurring the Lines between Business and Leisure; Here's How to Keep Things in Focus

PHOTO: **ERIC LAIGNEL**

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The world of interiors is out of focus. Everywhere you look, the lines that have traditionally divided commercial from residential spaces and business from leisure activities are blurry. Offices are designed to feel more like homes; hospitals now resemble comfortable hotels; and hotels are evolving into hybrid spaces that no longer distinguish between business and leisure travelers.

This mix of business and leisure is known in the hospitality industry as "bleisure," a term coined by British consultancy and trend forecaster, The Future Laboratory. The term is gaining popularity—thanks in large part to the pervasiveness of mobile technology. A recent study by Herndon, Va.-based BridgeStreet Global Hospitality confirmed that 83 percent of respondents use time on business trips to explore the city they're visiting. Additionally, the majority of respondents (60 percent) have taken bleisure trips with most respondents (30 percent) adding two vacation days to business trips.

Notably, 99 percent of hotel guests now travel with at least one device, according to a recent poll by SmartBrief. Of those, 45 percent travel with two devices and 40 percent travel with three or more. In short, technology is vital to guests whether they are on business, leisure or both, and they expect hotels to accommodate their need for connectivity.

But hospitality brands have to do more than add bandwidth to remain competitive. They need to embrace the mindset of a new generation of travelers that want to stay connected (online and in-person) and have authentic experiences in an environment with a distinct sense of place.

As the following trends illustrate, the hospitality market is changing. Here's what you need to know to keep things in focus:

Seamless Integration of Technology

From automated check-in kiosks to smartphones that act as room keys, hotels today are investing in technology upgrades to keep up with an increasingly tech-savvy traveler. In fact, more than half of hoteliers in a recent SmartBrief poll revealed they are focusing their

Guests are gravitating toward boutique hotels that are infused with local influences—and hospitality brands are responding. The Archer Hotel in New York by Glen & Co. Architecture is no cookie-cutter property; it is full of character and comfort.

Public spaces in hotels are no longer clearly defined by boundaries; open lobbies such as in the Archer Hotel seamlessly blend casual areas with food-and-beverage offerings, lending to a sense of "separate togetherness".

technology purchases in the coming year on the guestroom.

For example, properties, such as Hampton Hotels, now are redesigning guestrooms to include connectivity panels with USB ports and charging stations on the desktop or nightstand to prevent guests from having to move furniture, according to SmartBrief. Further, services from companies, like Shodogg, offer guests the ability to sync their mobile devices with the in-room television, giving them access to their own libraries of movies, music, photos and social media.

However, while technology demands are greater than ever, they should never steal attention away from what matters most in hospitality settings: the guest.

"I think the best examples we've seen and the way that we approach technology with hospitality environments is that it must always enhance the experience and not necessarily be the experience," notes Teddy Mayer, director of hospitality for Gensler, New York City.

In other words, it's important to keep things simple and not overwhelm people with massive screens or too many gadgets. "Technology, we all know, can get cumbersome and it can be over our heads at times," says Giana DiLeonardo, partner at DiLeonardo International, Providence, R.I. "I think discreet and simple technology that's integrated well into spaces is critical and is one of the trends of today."

That being said, guests' expectations of technology offerings within hotels are definitely high because they know they can (or should be able to) connect virtually anywhere.

"It's kind of a classic situation where everybody wants [WiFi] to be at least as good as in their own home, if not better, and often expects more," explains Brooke Taylor, director of interiors at Oakland, Calif.-based Arscine. "If you can't get a good WiFi signal and have really solid connectivity in a hotel experience then you're going to be frustrated because you're kind of like, 'Well, I get a better one at home'."

As a result, facility managers of hospitality properties are realizing the benefits of making technology improvements, which can sometimes be a challenge in retrofitting scenarios.

To create a distinctive sense of place, many hospitality venues are turning to local artists, craftsmen and artisans to imbue their properties with local flavor—sometimes to dramatic effect, as is the case at the Empéllon Al Pastor restaurant in New York, designed by Glen & Co. Architecture.

PHOTOS: DANIEL KRIEGER

"The hardest part is convincing owners that have spent money on projects to make substantive changes to their spaces," says Architect and Designer Glen Coban, founder of Glen & Co. Architecture, New York City. "I wouldn't say it's a barrier to entry, but they're beginning to understand that they have to invest in technology. They have to invest in certain upgrades because either the brand forces them to do it or the guests will force them to do it."

The New Lobby: Being Together, Separately

Making connections with others—or not—is a big part of what's driving the design of public spaces within hospitality facilities. The lobby is becoming a social and technological epicenter, where WiFi, communal tables, charging stations and a variety of seating options are standard, according to SmartBrief. Guests can choose to work semi-privately or take advantage of networking or socializing opportunities if they so choose.

This hybrid, multi-use space is meant to foster a sense of "separate togetherness" that enables a variety of functions depending on travelers' needs and desires. "Even

though [the lobby has] become a more social space, it still has a lot to do with this idea of being alone together," Taylor explains.

To make these multifaceted environments successful, proper space planning is essential, according to DiLeonardo. "Space planning and use of space is critical in active lobbies with multiple interactions," she says. "There are intimate seating pockets and communal areas where you can conduct business. There's also grab-and-go experiences in these lobbies so you have the opportunity to grab a bite to eat and sneak away and be on your own. It's really about how you incorporate different functions within the space."

Those functions can be broken down into a three-part analogy—the living room, the kitchen and the neighborhood hub, according to Jason Dries-Daffner, senior director of architecture, EDG Interior Architecture and Design, San Francisco. "They actually have a residential correlation and it's not surprising because these are places where people feel comfortable and that are at a human scale," he says.

"These have lots of different manifestations but basically it's the idea of the living room—it's a place to relax," Dries-Daffner explains. "It doesn't matter how beautifully you decorated your living room, everyone hangs out in the kitchen. Finally, if you think about the lobby as a town piazza—it's a plaza, it's a public gathering place. It's not just a place to go through for circulation, but it's a place that you want to stop and rest and take a break, to meet friends or just to see what's going on. Like a town square or a neighborhood hub, you've got lots of choices on what to do."

A Sense of Place

Another prominent trend shaping the hospitality industry is the move toward boutique hotels, defined as upscale, smaller properties focused on design, technology, local culture and standing out from the cookie-cutter hotel crowd, according to a recent *International Business Times* article. Major hotel brands, such as Marriott, Hilton and Hyatt, have been capitalizing on this trend. Boutique hotels comprise about 5 percent of the market, but the trend has grown 6.1 percent per year since 2009 and is expected to accelerate

through 2019, according to research firm IBISWorld.

The reasons for the success of this niche market are many, but among them are the needs of many hotel properties to differentiate their brands, as well as to give guests an authentic experience with the community they can't get from a chain hotel.

"To really get a sense of place and to feel like you had an experience that was specific to the location that you're in is important to people," Taylor suggests. "The boutique mindset has been embraced by everyone because they see how successful it is. And that's largely because it has a personality—it has a soul, and that's the appeal."

Mayer adds that many major chains are creating new boutique brands as a way not only to help them diversify, but to compete with the independents that have benefitted from this trend of localization. "Everyone wants to be in that world [because] people don't love a cookie-cutter type approach," he says. "We're always trying to figure out how to infuse a regional, or local or neighborhood perspective in all of our projects."

To accomplish this in practice, Taylor notes that successful boutique hotels support local artists. While this isn't new, per se, hotels are now going further than just hanging art on the walls by hiring local furniture makers, craftsmen and artisans, highlighting and celebrating the local influences of the community throughout the hotel.

Sustainability Is a Given

Although there are still challenges to greening facilities that essentially run around the clock, hospitality clients are expecting sustainable solutions to their retrofitting needs—and opportunities abound.

As Coban observes: "Sustainability is no longer a hot-button issue. It's basically understood that we're tackling that on a day-in and day-out basis. That has become as prevalent to us as carrying a smartphone or cell phone."

According to Dries-Daffner, many properties are pursuing sustainable design during renovations because of energy-conservation regulations but also to recoup their return on investment by reducing operating costs. "That's a perfect time to take lighting design into consideration because they're swapping
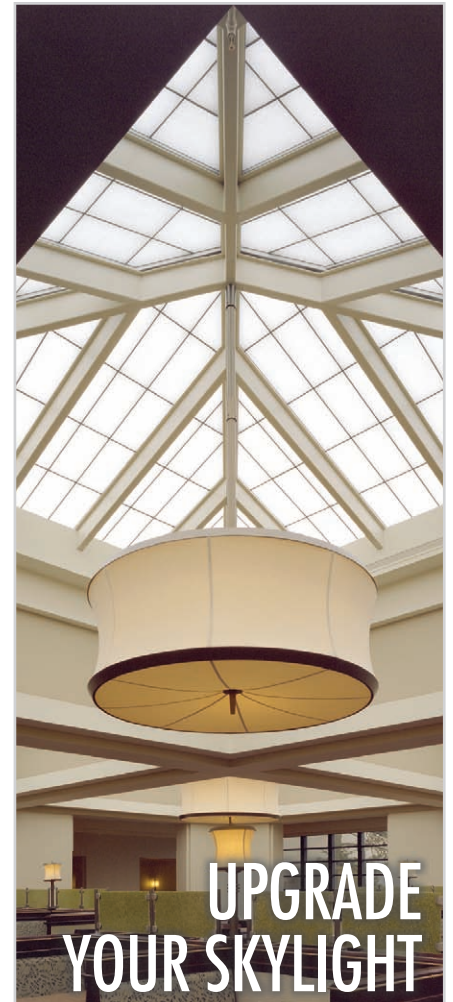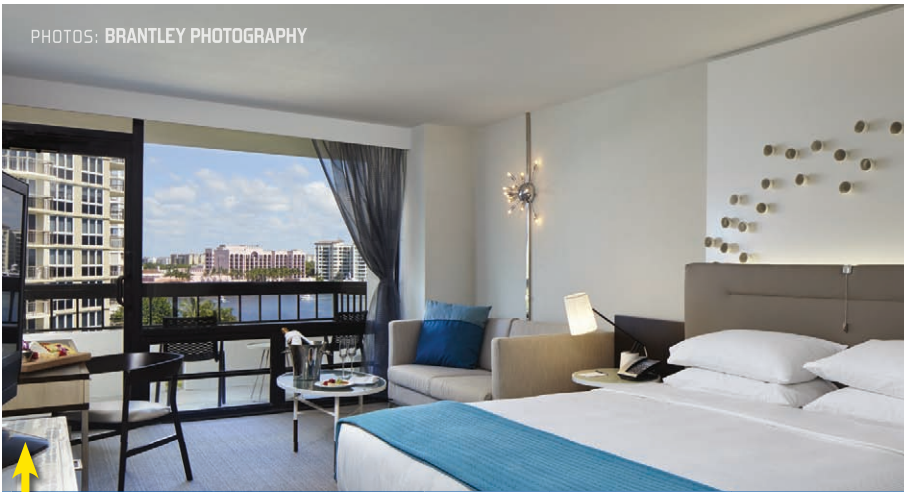
Seamless integration of technology is imperative in hotels, like in this guestroom at the Waterstone Resort & Marine by Gensler, where guests expect the same (or better) level of comfort and connectivity during their stay.

Public spaces and lobbies in hotels are becoming social and technology hubs where people can work or socialize as illustrated at the Waterstone Resort & Marina in Boca Raton, Fla., designed by Gensler.

out either the lamps or the fixtures of the whole system and it goes hand-in-glove with sustainability," he notes.

DiLeonardo concurs and suggests that retrofits are a great opportunity to address the environmental impacts of products in hotel properties. Durability and timeless design are important considerations in the retrofitting process, she says, because "when those renovations do come up it's not a wholesale change. Looking at the durability of products and being very thoughtful in what you're putting into the spaces is critical."

Getting Back to Basics

Ultimately, one of the failings of exploring design trends like these is that they are so often short lived. What's in vogue today is often passé tomorrow. As a result, a simple, timeless approach is often the best route when it comes to renovating interiors.

"We're seeing a lot of this sort of back-to-basics kind of design where it's not too trendy; it's not trying too hard; it's easy," Mayer explains.

And in the world of hospitality, the basics always come back to one thing: the guest. Every decision to design, upgrade or renovate should be made with the guest experience in mind.

"Sometimes it's just asking the question and thinking about it in a little different way—and it's always from a standpoint of the guest experience," Coban says. "How do they navigate their way through the lobby or to the guestroom from the time they get off the curb into the building? What do we want the guest to see?"

Whatever it is, make sure it's in clear focus. ⟐

No Substitute for the Personal Touch

While the high-tech trend is still in full swing and technology upgrades are key to a successful hotel property, it's important to remember that even the best applications can't substitute for good old-fashioned customer service. Besides, everyone needs to unplug every so often and be catered to, and there's no better place to do that than in a hospitality setting that's designed well.

"I think that there's definitely a careful balance that we're all still trying to tread," notes Brooke Taylor, director of interiors at Oakland, Calif.-based Arscine. "While technology offers lots of convenience and we all love it ... you want to be able to escape it, too. For example, not having a person check you in—there's a lot of mixed feelings on that and it goes back to the essence of hospitality. It's a personal touch;

it's being taken care of; it's being welcomed; it's being cared for—and an iPad isn't going to do that for you."

Teddy Mayer, director of hospitality for Gensler in New York City, echoes that sentiment, noting, "No matter what the technology is, no matter how seamless it becomes, you always want to be able to make that really personal connection with your guest."