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LOOKING IN ON LOBBIES

Designers strive to keep up with how the ever-changing guest uses public spaces.

By Jena Tesse Fox

HOTEL LOBBIES HAVE CHANGED DRAMATICALLY over the last decade, forcing designers to be on their toes to keep up with evolving tastes and trends. Is the lobby just a place to pass through? Is it a meeting hub? Maybe an old-fashioned lounge for idle chit-chat over drinks?

Christy Hubbard, a senior project designer from Gettys, recently completed design work on the Le Meridien Atlanta Perimeter, and says that hotel lobbies must accommodate the constantly connected traveler. "It's key for hotel lobbies to have multiple areas to plug in for computers and phone charging," she says. "They also need to have an interactive service focus to make the guest feel important and cared for." Tom Hoch of Tom Hoch Designs, who has worked on multiple

Marriott and Ritz-Carlton projects, agrees that technology is a must for contemporary lobbies: "Great audio/video and interactive [features are] a necessity," he says. "This must be done in a format that is architecturally integrated, with a touch screen and real time information, much like the Marriott Go-Board."

Therese Virserius, owner of Therese Virserius Design, who helped redesign the Hyatt Regency Montreal, agrees: "Five years from now interactive touchscreens will be everywhere. Replacing the traditional concierge desk as we know it and allowing guests to find everything they need at the touch of a button."

But technology cannot take the place of one-on-one human connection, says Carlos Herrera, a project designer at Gettys. Check-in kiosks, for example, cannot replace a personal welcome and check-in by hotel staff. "There is a certain romanticism in being greeted and attended to a person and not by a machine," he says. "Although at times you would like to rush past check-in, there is always a want for human interaction."



PHOTOGRAPHY: Le Méridien Atlanta Perimeter, Tom Hoch Designs, Hyatt Regency Montreal

Opposite:
The Lobby at the Hyatt Regency Montreal.
Here clockwise from top left:
Seating at Hyatt Regency Montreal;
Reception at Le Méridien Atlanta Perimeter;
Lobby Area at Le Méridien Atlanta Perimeter;
Lobby at Creighton Farms in Virginia.



We have to get away from being affixed to our mobile devices and get back to acknowledging the people around us.”

Hoch notes that kiosks are already becoming obsolete. “Guests can check in a variety of ways including via tablets and even in advance online,” he says. “Numerous items are deemed out-of-date with hotel lobbies, including large, ominous reception desks.”

COMFORT ABOVE ELEGANCE

“In new construction or redesign projects, various elements such as too much wall covering, not enough texture, lack of natural materials, cold finishes and a commercial feel are being replaced,” Hoch says. Herrera says that lobbies in the future will focus more on feeling than appearances. “The days are gone where placing chairs up against a wall was the norm,” he says. “We are seeing more and more social and interactive seating accommodations where people can both work and meet people.”

Virserius echoes the sentiment, complaining that “overly formal spaces” feel out of date and out of touch. “They are a dying breed,” she says.

So how will hoteliers and designers make lobbies feel more welcoming and comfortable? Rather than aiming for elegance and formality, many designers note that they are bringing in elements of home. “Lobbies will be viewed as an extension of your living room, prompting more appealing and intimate interior design to exude an approachable feel and less grandiose,” Hoch predicts. “The integration of dining and drinking into the lobby experience to create varied guest experiences from morning and day to night time is a big trend,” says Hubbard

“Clearly defined lines between the lobby, lounge and restaurants don’t really exist anymore,” Virserius adds. “There is more of a flow that leads you from space to space.” Hoch thinks that over the next few years more

grab-and-go food options will appear in lobbies— “similar to airports,” he says.

Herrera takes it a step further, predicting the combination of lobby and hotel bar as guests look to unwind in less formal settings. And, of course, there are many kinds of bars that could fit the bill. “Catering to morning and evening crowds is a must,” he says. “The ability to serve coffee and transitioning to liquor as the day goes by keeps the lobby active and adds variety to the guest experience. We have to cater to not only the guests’ first arrival, but a second and third arrival to the hotel. Being able to transform a coffee bar into a liquor bar from day to night adds multiple discovery elements during a guest’s stay. The recently completed Le Meridien Atlanta Perimeter is an example of this trend.”

But ultimately, the basic purpose of a hotel lobby will not change, even as the individual elements do. “Lobbies will continue to be places to congregate and socialize,” Hubbard says. “They’ll continue to be places to work and meet much like the popular coffee houses and cafes.”

Virserius concurs. “The lobby should feel alive,” she says, adding that while it shouldn’t be overly loud, it should feel happening. “A place where people can hang out with a glass of wine or do work and not be isolated.” HD