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Hotel bathrooms have become a vital part of the traveler's experience; Is changing it again good?

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Our expectation of the hotel bathroom experience has changed leaps and bounds through the recent years and it continues to evolve as we move into the future. Every day the average hotel guest is exposed to product branding, new technology and worldwide experiences through the internet. The baby boomers are looking towards more travel and have an image of "lifestyle". The youngest of the Gen X'rs are now in their late twenties traveling the world looking for an "experience" and the Y generation is emerging into the travel world with their own expectations of technology and instant service. Although these factors affect many design aspects, one thing is certain for all of them, there is a high level of expectation for an "experience" and service that is better than what can be found at their own homes; particularly in the bathroom.

Less than 10 years ago bathroom design and amenities were at the low end of the top 10 things guests look for in a hotel stay experience. As we all remember, the baths were extremely small with poor lighting, dark colors and bare necessities for amenities including towels that were rough enough to remove the top layer of skin. Looking back, we were all okay with it and it satisfied the functional need. Within the last 5 years, that has all changed and our expectations have grown dramatically in every way. The bath experience is now in the top 3 of what guests look for in a hotel room and it is a lot more than just good water pressure. It has become more than a functional space; it is a relaxation and retreat for the weary traveler to re-energize.

One of the major catalysts for this bath revolution was the introduction of the Heavenly Bath by Starwood in 2001. This was the first hotel company that implemented a high quality bath experience throughout its brand. We now see these changes in all brands from the curved shower rod that makes for a more spacious shower become standard to the rich granite vanity tops with warm mill work wood bases. Lighting is a key component in setting up the bath experience with unique decorative accent lighting and specific lighting for makeup and shaving.

In addition, many hotel brands are providing higher end amenities or even becoming partners with upscale manufacturers or spas to bring a luxury spa experience to the branded properties. This encompasses the full service through the select brands. In 2006 Hilton added bathroom amenities from Crabtree & Evelyn while spa products like Aveda or Bliss are common in other branded properties. As visiting a spa is very common for the modern guest, it makes sense to integrate this right into the guest's own bathroom. Higher thread count linens, a variety of upper tier bath amenities, full sized residential style hair dryers, over sized fluffy towels and luxurious robes are just the beginning.

The finish materials used in the bathrooms are also of high concern. Materials such as wood and stone provide a natural warm feel in the guest bath while colors and textures further enhance the overall experience. We touched upon the granite tops and mill work bases but there is more.

Brands like Cambria are introducing vessel sinks and custom faucets into their bath designs and making the functional pieces actual design focal points rather than afterthoughts as they were in the past. Along with the materials and fixtures comes the thought of sustainability and green design. Today's hotel guest is environmentally savvy and is appreciative of a hotel that is sensitive to environmental issues. The educated guest enjoys knowing how green initiatives are being achieved while providing an equally quality experience. These issues can be addressed in the bathroom, typically the largest area of waste, by providing water saving fixtures, dual flush toilets, environmentally sensitive packaging for the amenities, environmental cleaning products and natural replenishable materials for the finishes.

So with all that is happening now, what is the next move for the guest bath design? We have infused the bath with luxury, upgraded the materials, utilized beautiful lighting, what else can we do? Well, we can change the entire way the bathroom has been perceived and open it up to the guest room and break down that privacy barrier. No longer is it the inner sanctum of privacy to be secluded; it will have the same experience as the guest room. These barriers are being broken down through glass showers that create the separation to the guest room, bringing the sink back onto the main guest room in a way that is decorative and appropriate while maintaining the water closet in a separate private room.

This departure from the isolated bath further enhances the guest experience within the room and allows for much more interaction with the space. In addition the integration of these two spaces makes the overall room feel much bigger and brighter. These drastic changes to the idea of the private bathroom are getting interesting reactions from the market as it raises the old question "if it ain't broke....". But is the current design broken? Over the next several months there will be many new products and design innovations introduced that break the bathroom mold and provide new ways guests will perceive and interact with the bathroom. It will be interesting to see which side of the fence the hotel consumer falls. As for this designer, I like and welcome the new direction of this high end luxury open bath experience, when I am traveling alone!

The bathroom is no longer meant to be just a functional space for bathing and grooming, it is to be a place of retreat, relaxation and innovation. This room is where we all begin and end each day; it is one of the first experiences we have in the morning for rejuvenation and is part of our wind down routine in the evening. Why shouldn't it reflect these experiences in its design and adapt to our lifestyle?