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The future of hospitality: How architects are adapting to accommodate the new normal - by Harry Wheeler

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We're 11 months into 2020 and if someone would have told me that the world was continuing to battle a global pandemic I, like many of you, would have thought that was preposterous! Unfortunately, we all continue to live with impacts from COVID-19 and face ongoing health and safety concerns for ourselves, our families, our loved ones, and as business owners – our customers and employees.

For the hospitality industry, the pandemic has changed the way we think about virtually every business, operational, structural and design decision we make. Hospitality operators and brands have protocols in place to assess and respond to day-to-day business decisions but lingering questions remain . . . How do we move forward in a travel industry that is idle? How do we look ahead to 2021 and beyond? And, what changes as a result of the pandemic are here to stay?

New societal and industry concerns

Both as a society and an industry, we continue to face ongoing health concerns that require us to offer a renewed promise to travelers regarding their safety. This impacts everything – from the way we design/retrofit public spaces; to how we think about food and beverage offerings and building/air filtration systems; and how we ensure our housekeeping and cleaning standards are up to par.

There are also the unknown short- and long-term effects of the pandemic on the local economy including: Travel restrictions and standards; varying health and safety protocols; an increasing number of companies who are extending mandatory work-at-home policies for their employees well into 2021; and overall impacts on local tourism including declining retail, restaurants and other small businesses.

Navigating this 'new normal' is no task for the weary. The market has changed. With that, comes fluctuating business costs that center on guest health and safety. We cannot underestimate the changes this places on the hospitality industry and how we, as architects and designers, can help

our clients in this new domain.

Preparing for the future: Ways to adapt and remain flexible

As we look to the future, we will continue to face customer growth and staffing challenges, but will add more complex concerns – guest and employee health, safety and well-being – to the mix, creating an enhanced promise we must deliver to our guests. Many of the changes will be long-lived with COVID further accelerating many emerging trends like digital innovation, contact-less payments, self-service, etc. To address this, we are leveraging best practices in architecture and interior design coupled with new, innovative ideas to re-imagine spaces, textures and other protocols to maximize guest health and safety.

At check-in, we continue to leverage touch-less check-in stations designed as pods instead of traditional desks – so employees can move freely about and maintain social distancing standards from guests more easily. Properties continue to encourage guests to download the property's app and use their smart phones to check-in, check-out, access their guest rooms and other hotel amenities, pay for food and beverage items, etc. We are also incorporating touch-less, voice-activated elevators to ensure guests can safely move about the property without compromising COVID health protocols.

In guest rooms, brands are elevating their cleaning standards, sealing doors after the rooms are cleaned so guests have confidence and peace of mind that no one else has been in the room after it's been sanitized. Items like television remotes, hairdryers, handles and light switches are being sealed and wrapped after individual cleaning. We're also adjusting furniture placement within the room itself – minimizing seating options and creating more space throughout the room. And, rethinking selections for interior finishes and textures, e.g. less fabric, more hard surfaces, less porous materials, replacing traditional finishes with those that are easier to clean and maintain over time.

When it comes to public spaces, we are retrofitting existing hotels with plexiglass dividers to ensure proper spacing and social distancing guidelines can be achieved. We are doing a lot more with doors and windows to increase air flow in common areas – ensuring these high-trafficked areas get fresh, natural air. We're also increasing outdoor seating areas and connecting them to lobbies and food and beverage stations so travelers have the option to lounge and eat in open, safe common spaces. And, we're expanding on available rooftop spaces. Outdoor roof decks and other open spaces have become even more important in this climate.

In the kitchen, we're incorporating glass partitions and windows so it removes the guesswork of how guests' food is prepared. Brands and operating partners are rethinking their entire food and beverage programs to adhere to strict standards required for guest safety. And, in ways that are more transparent to guests, e.g. open kitchens, eliminating open food buffets, less shared plates, creating hygienic glass storage options for food and beverages, offering bottled beverages instead of tap water or uncovered drinks, etc.

Finally, we are seeing increased investments in building systems, especially the HVAC in public common spaces and guest rooms. These systems are no longer being used solely for heating/cooling but also to clean the air. Or, we're seeing brands leveraging air filtration systems within the mechanical units of guest rooms. Most guest rooms we design have independent units so you're not pulling fresh air from public spaces or other guest rooms, but rather from the rooftop, which is a major plus in this environment.

Overcoming uncertainty and looking toward the future

Over the years, brands have worked to differentiate themselves from each other. During the two years preceding the pandemic, there were more hotel brands announced than ever before. In today's current environment, how do we strip back the layers to deliver our brand's identity and promise, yet more cost-effectively and transparently for guests? As architects and designers, we are working with our clients and partners to balance the right way to do this while delivering a superior customer experience in a comfortable and inviting environment. More than ever before, dollars and cents are being spent in ways that truly matter to the health, safety and well-being of our guests. We must navigate this "new normal" together.

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