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Breaking through the plexiglass: Hotels reemergence from the travel reboot - by Harry Wheeler

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Harry Wheeler

Over the past 20 months, the global pandemic wreaked havoc on local, domestic, and international travel. As a result, the hotel industry was devastated – forcing us to adjust to strict health and safety regulations and rethink nearly every design, structural, and operational decision we make into the foreseeable future.

Now, after nearly two years of being cooped up at home, travel is starting to pick up. People are more comfortable leaving their local neighborhoods, getting on planes. And hotels are back! How do we break through the plexiglass barriers we created now that hotels are regaining their foothold? Will the hotel industry prove able to emerge from quarantine?

Taking a step back to move forward

Hotel brands spent a lot of time over the past year and a half evaluating their models. Now, many of them are relaunching or revamping their systems, designs, brands, or in some cases, all the above. New hotels are being introduced to the market to capitalize on gaps in certain segments. For those hotels reopening, we're seeing new and fresh experiences for guests including cleaner and brighter looks with less clutter; more flexible furniture designs for guests to use the room the way they need; and a ground up rethinking of the way we deliver food and beverage options. Lastly, today's properties are working hard to maintain brand strength and create/sustain loyalty programs for their guests.

Running to reopen, challenges along the route

Even with the impending variants, hotels are making a run at reopening. With this, comes challenges –continuing to innovate, meeting staffing needs, maintaining cleanliness standards to keep guests and employees safe, meeting guest demand, and more.

Today's travelers are extra savvy with technology, virtual meetings, digital options, and using their smartphones for anything and everything. They have a higher comfort and expectation level when it comes to innovation and the use of technology throughout their hotel experience. Staffing continues to remain an issue for hoteliers, with staffing at a premium. Many hotels cannot fully open due to staffing constraints.

Hotels are also still grappling with the cleanliness and sanitation policies introduced over the last year. They must maintain these important, yet oftentimes costly, new standards. And ensure the process is clear, transparent, and effectively communicated to guests.

Lastly, the hotel industry is continuing to face challenges meeting customer demand, especially with staffing constraints, to support a backlog of large social gatherings like weddings, family reunions, and religious events that were put on the pandemic pause. Accommodating two years of events in a shortened timeframe is no easy feat.

Adapting to guests' new and changing expectations

Despite challenges, we're rising to the occasion to create safe and enhanced experiences for

travelers. For most guests, proper cleanliness standards remain critical. Hotel brands are mitigating guests' fears by maintaining the sanitization and cleaning standards introduced during the height of COVID. In guest rooms, we're adjusting furniture placement and altering room layouts to create more space throughout the room.

For new hotels and those going through a revamp, designers are rethinking selections for interior textures and finishes – more hard surfaces, less fabric, and replacing traditional finishes with those that are easier to clean and maintain. When it comes to peace of mind, today's hoteliers are investing in marketing messages to ensure guests are aware of safety precautions and measures being taken throughout the entirety of their stay.

Many hotels have eliminated the front desk by giving travelers options to check-in online, or are leveraging touchless check-in stations or pods so employees can move around freely yet maintain social distancing guidelines. Some properties have amped up their apps and now give guests the ability to use their smartphones for basically all aspects of their stay – check-in, check-out, guest room access, gym access, ordering and paying for food and beverage items, and more.

We're also seeing an increase in keyless room/hotel entry, QR codes at hotel bars and restaurants to access menus and for contactless payment, elevator capacity limits to ensure guest and employee safety, and enhancements in signage and fixtures to optimize walkways and ensure social distancing guidelines are clear and enforced.

When it comes to public spaces, many of the changes we made because of COVID are here to stay. Expanding on rooftop areas, capitalizing on outdoor spaces, and utilizing other open areas for common spaces to lounge, eat, and work – will remain a key part of long-term design strategies. We also continue to look at how we use doors and windows to increase natural air flow throughout guest rooms and common areas. And are continuously looking at how we can expand lobbies and food and beverage stations to maximize areas where guests can safely social distance while eating and lounging comfortably.

Food and beverage options remain a major focus as we navigate the adherence to new guest safety standards. Brands are completely rethinking their entire food and beverage programs. Some things that have been put in place are eliminating food buffets, altering menu options to accommodate less shared plates, increasing bottled beverage options, offering contactless ordering and payment functionality, and creating open kitchens with increased ventilation and airflow.

Last but certainly not least, whether guests stay at a branded, boutique or soft brand hotel, today's hotels are striving for an authentic connection to their neighborhoods and community. One thing the period of non-travel has taught us is that the connections to our community are incredibly important. This trend has been a mainstay over the past few years. And we continue to see it show up in hotel design elements (artwork, decorative accents, murals), food and beverage options (craft beer and localized food offerings), and amenities (free bikes, Instagram areas capitalizing on local views, local guided running routes), and more.

A bright future ahead

We cannot underestimate the changes the pandemic has forced us to make in pretty much every aspect of the way we approach business, guest service, and life. As a hospitality industry, we will continue to encounter many challenges and likely many long-term effects of the pandemic. Yet even with all these setbacks, the market is rebuilding. Once travelers regain their trust and confidence in what our properties can deliver, the market will emerge at full strength. At the end of the day, it is all about service, hospitality, and clear communication to deliver the promise we make to each and every guest – a clean and safe hotel experience.

Harry Wheeler AIA, NCARB, LEED is a principal at Group One Partners, Inc., an award-winning hospitality design firm based in Boston that specializes in architectural, interior design, and purchasing services for hospitality properties.

Wheeler is a registered architect in more than 15 states and a member of numerous architectural, lodging, and marketing associations.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540