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Rooms for renewal: Rethinking hospitality through a wellness lens - by Ken MacKenzie and Carmen Almos

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It was March, and we were deep in the weeds of a particularly complex hotel transaction – one filled with last-minute price negotiations, tense stakeholder calls, and an ownership group located several time zones away. Kenneth MacKenzie of Dalton & Finegold and I had been navigating this winding path for weeks, balancing contractual intricacies with real-time deal dynamics. As we inched closer to the closing table, the pressure mounted. I was eight months pregnant and juggling the mental load of a looming delivery with the adrenaline of finalizing a multi-million-dollar deal. In those moments between conference calls and signature blocks, I found myself fantasizing not about celebratory champagne – but about something quieter, deeper: a postpartum retreat. A place where I could rest, restore, and disconnect.

That desire – for something more intentional, more healing – stuck with me. And it sparked a conversation between Ken and me: what if hospitality wasn't just about heads in beds? What if the next evolution of real estate investment in New England was rooted not just in luxury or location, but in wellness, immersion, and meaning?

Across the region, developers, investors, and operators are starting to ask the same questions.

A Shift in What Travelers Want

Wellness and experiential travel are no longer niche trends, but rather are rapidly becoming an important segment of the hospitality industry. Wellness tourism – defined broadly as travel with the

intent to maintain or improve one's well-being, growing at twice the rate of general tourism, according to the Global Wellness Institute. Guests are actively seeking immersive environments that blend rest with enrichment, such as spa services that go beyond massages, rooms that calm the senses, food that fuels, and locations that feel aligned with nature, purpose, or personal growth.

This shift is particularly resonant in New England, where the physical landscape – coastlines, mountains, and forests naturally support retreat-style getaways. But it's not just about location. It's about intentional design, thoughtful programming, and hospitality that feels personal, restorative, and grounded.

Several hospitality properties across the region are already redefining what a “stay” looks and feels like:

- The Mayflower Inn & Spa (Washington CT): A historic property transformed through a partnership with The Well; this inn offers integrative wellness experiences from acupuncture to forest bathing. The luxury wellness programming has not only elevated the guest experience, but also driven substantial increases in ADR.
- The Longfellow Hotel (Portland, ME): Opened in 2023, The Longfellow emphasizes wellness as a core brand pillar. With features like infrared saunas, meditation rooms, and locally sourced rituals, it has quickly carved out a loyal following and sparked investor interest in similar urban wellness properties.
- Tourists Hotel (North Adams, MA): This reimagined roadside lodge offers minimalist design, deep nature integration, and an immersive guest ethos. It has become a model for developers aiming to reposition dated inventory into experiential lifestyle assets.

Each of these properties exemplifies a new approach to hospitality – one that fuses design, lifestyle, and well-being in a way that resonates deeply with today's travelers.

Postpartum Retreats: A Missed Opportunity in New England?

While New England leads in many areas of wellness hospitality, wellness is not merely a physical matter. There is a mental and emotional component to wellness that is at the moment underserved in New England. One notable gap stands out: luxury postpartum retreats. Modeled after centuries-old traditions in Asia and Europe, these high-end recovery retreats offer new mothers a curated environment to rest, heal, and bond with their newborn – complete with private suites, on-site lactation consultants, chef-prepared meals, and wellness programming.

Nationally, this segment is gaining traction. Boram Postnatal Retreat in New York City, housed in The Langham Hotel, offers a \$1,400 per night experience blending hotel-level luxury with postpartum care. In California and Arizona, destinations like Sanctuary of Scottsdale and The Retreat at Southern California Reproductive Center provide similar environments. These properties are thriving, consistently booked, and increasingly seen as essential extensions of wellness hospitality.

Yet to our knowledge, no such offering currently exists in New England. Despite the region's affluent demographics and reputation for health-conscious travel, there is a noticeable absence of real estate-backed postpartum retreat concepts. For developers in New England, this absence represents a unique and likely lucrative niche opportunity in a wellness category that is not only currently underdeveloped, but which has also proven elsewhere to be emotionally resonant and commercially scalable.

Implications for Investors and Developers

For owners and operators, the takeaway is clear: experiential and wellness-oriented hotels can command premium rates, increase length of stay, and build stronger brand loyalty. From a legal and transactional perspective, these projects often involve different risk profiles – ranging from operational complexities to intellectual property tied to wellness branding and programming. The need for highly trained and scarce operating personnel in high demand raises the hurdle to clear opening of such a facility. As is always the case, along with challenge, if met, comes reward.

Additionally, the underwriting logic is evolving. Investors are no longer simply evaluating NOI and room count. Instead, they're looking at things like programmatic revenue (think: spa, workshops, private chefs), dynamic use of communal space, and even community integration. Zoning, licensing, and environmental impact assessments may also take on greater importance as these properties tend to be built into more natural or sensitive settings.

The Path Forward

As we reflect on the deal that brought us to this topic – a closing born out of tension, distance, and complexity – we're reminded of why this shift in hospitality matters. That deal, like many others in today's market, was hard. The world is hard. And the role of hospitality is changing because our needs as people are changing.

New England is uniquely positioned to lead the next wave of wellness and immersive hospitality. It has the landscape, the legacy of retreat and renewal, and the investor interest. The challenge and the opportunity lie in building properties that aren't just beautiful, but meaningful. We're not just designing places to sleep. We're designing places to heal.

Ken MacKenzie is partner of Dalton & Finegold, LLP and a member of the International Hospitality Consultants (ISHC).

Formerly, MacKenzie was the co-leader of the hospitality and recreation group at Goulston & Storrs. MacKenzie represents institutional investors, private equity funds, investment managers, pension funds, university endowments, REITs, major lending institutions and developers in the acquisition, financing and disposition of all classes of real estate assets both nationally and internationally.

MacKenzie specializes in transactions involving hospitality assets and has significant experience in large-scale joint-ventured deals, often involving non-profit institutions such as universities or hospitals. He frequently assists clients in structuring their responses to RFPs for complex mixed-use

projects.

MacKenzie received his A.B. from Dartmouth College and his J.D. from Boston University School of Law, where he graduated magna cum laude. MacKenzie is admitted to practice law in the state of Massachusetts.

Carmen Almos is the founder and CEO of Ashburton Hospitality, a full-service consultancy firm specializing in asset management for the hospitality industry. With a career spanning over two decades, Almos has established herself as a visionary leader dedicated to optimizing hotel assets and driving sustainable growth for her clients.

Born in Ashburton, South Africa, Almos's early experiences in her family's motel business in Tennessee ignited her passion for hospitality. She learned the intricacies of hotel operations firsthand, from managing costs to enhancing guest experiences. These formative years instilled in her a deep understanding of the industry's nuances and the importance of strategic oversight.

Before founding Ashburton Hospitality, Almos held several senior leadership positions. As Senior Vice President of Strategic Operations for Mission Hill Hospitality, she was instrumental in building and leading a team focused on strategic positioning, revenue management, and capital investments. Her tenure as Senior Vice President of Acquisitions and Asset Management at Investra Capital, Inc. further honed her expertise in identifying value-add opportunities and executing investment objectives. Almos's early career also includes her role as Asset and Feasibility Manager for IFA Hotels & Resorts, overseeing regions in Africa and the Indian Ocean

In September 2023, Almos launched Ashburton Hospitality with the vision of providing unparalleled asset management services. Under her leadership, the firm has rapidly expanded its portfolio, managing properties across major brands such as Hilton, Marriott, and IHG. Ashburton Hospitality offers a comprehensive suite of services, including project management, transaction advisement, and lender/receivership services, all tailored to enhance profitability and operational efficiency

Beyond her professional achievements, Almos is committed to fostering diversity and inclusion within the hospitality sector. She actively works to create acquisition opportunities that pave the way for women and minorities, aiming to break the cycle of generational wealth disparity. Her dedication to mentorship and advocacy has inspired many aspiring female hospitality professionals.

Almos's insights and expertise have been featured in industry publications, and she is a sought-after speaker at conferences focused on hospitality investment and operations. Her journey from a small town in South Africa to leading a successful consultancy firm exemplifies her resilience, strategic foresight, and unwavering commitment to excellence.

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