

HOTEL DEVELOPERS REVEAL SPACE-SAVING TACTICS

By **kostuch** - March 4, 2016



Let's face it: real estate suitable for large hotel developments isn't exactly plentiful in urban markets these days. And it's not much better in secondary or tertiary markets, either. In Canada, and around the world, it's getting harder to find sufficient space for new hotel builds and the challenges of keeping costs low and profits up are pushing developers to use creative design techniques to build hotels with smaller footprints — without impacting the guest experience.

The team at Best Western Hotels & Resorts has jumped right on this trend, launching two new brand prototypes that are "all about getting into these tight sites," according to Amy Hulbert, managing director of Design for the Phoenix-based company. The idea for V-b was first introduced in late 2014 as an upper-midscale brand aimed at the urban/primary markets; last year, V-b's mid-scale sister hotel brand, GLo-, was introduced for the secondary or tertiary markets. "The premise that these brands were built on was maximizing space and using everything wisely," says Hulbert. She says the GLo- concept received massive interest from members before the prototype was even finished, and V-b currently has a number of projects in development in Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, Staten Island, N.Y., Little Rock, Ark. and Springfield, Mo.

"With some of our V-b sites, we've had really good opportunities in pockets of Miami, for instance, where you'd wonder, 'where would you even build?'" she says, of the prototype that features 101 keys. "But we're building them in an L-shape to get the right number of rooms. We can be creative in how we're getting rooms into these sites. So it's really about that flexibility."

Then there's the smaller room size, a trademark of this trend. "In a typical guestroom, you walk in and there's an entry corridor, a bathroom off to one side and usually a closet off to the other,"

says Hulbert. “[With GLo-] we eliminated that whole portion of the room, saving us anywhere from 25 to 35 sq. ft., and just opened right into the room. Then we centre-loaded the rooms back to back [via the bathrooms], and with that space savings, developers’ eyes just lit up; because they knew that square-foot savings per room was just tremendous.”

Tighter spaces also means financial savings. “Slightly smaller rooms means less utility costs to heat and cool the room,” says Eric Watson, chief operating officer at MasterBuilt Hotels, a Calgary-based hotel development company that currently holds the master territorial agreement to develop the Microtel by Wyndham brand across Canada. “From a housekeeping point of view, they can turn a room a little quicker, there’s less common area to mop up; you’ve got all those things adding up and it drives down your operating margins.”

Featuring a smaller footprint, on average 87 rooms, but ranging between 60 and 125, is in fact, a core element of the Microtel identity. “Effectively, we’ve taken an economy-sized box and run it to compete in the mid-scale market,” says Watson. The key is to make the rooms small enough to drive savings, but not so compact that the guest experience will be affected. Microtel hotels cost 10 to 30 per cent less to develop compared to competitors in a similar space, he adds. “We’ve got a lower capital cost, so right away we can compete at a slightly lower rate.”

Furniture can go a long way in making the most out of a small layout, adds Anil Taneja, president, North America for Palm Holdings Inc. “In our Holiday Inn Express in Halifax, instead of couches, we’re going to have chaise lounges in all of our king rooms,” says Taneja of the 325-sq.-ft. guestrooms.

“Another thing we’re doing in some of our hotels is using barn doors, [which slide rather than swing open]. So with a barn door between the bathroom and the bedroom, or in a variety of other places, you don’t need a full 180 degrees of space for the door to open. Those are great space-saving tactics and we’re seeing a lot more of that,” he adds. Other tactics include cupboards or drawers built into furniture, multi-functional pieces of furniture (combining a desk and cupboard, for instance), and work desks that can be pushed into other furniture and hidden away until needed.

Meanwhile, creative lighting can allow a space to serve different functions and dayparts.

“Lighting can make a space feel completely different, especially with open lobbies,” says Best Western’s Hulbert. “You don’t want the place where you got your coffee in the morning to look like the same place you’re going to get a dessert and maybe have your wine at the end of the day, so they’re looking at creative space transformation through [lighting] gestures.”

Lobbies and other communal spaces, including food-and-beverage areas, are being transformed to become more space-efficient without sacrificing utility or aesthetic value. "A lobby isn't just a lobby anymore," she adds. As an example, lighting helps transform the ambiance of the bar at the V-b from daytime to nighttime. "The bar has a wire mesh facing, and the back is backlit, so we can actually change the colours so it almost looks like a different piece of furniture. And we can dim and colour the lighting that hangs down over the bar... Because we're using all LED lighting, you can do so much," she explains.

Another benefit of multi-functional common spaces is the potential labour savings. Taneja cites the example of the Bistro concept in Courtyard by Marriott properties, featured at Palm's Courtyard by Marriott in Waterloo, Ont. "One of the enhancement options [with the Bistro] is to put a mini kitchen in the front," says Taneja. "The Bistro actually integrates part of their lobby, so if you put a mix of soft seating and hard seating, you can double up a restaurant as a lobby. We have our bartender go out into the lobby, since it's open, and offer drinks to people anywhere in the lobby. And when it's empty, we can create an inviting space and have that person double up as a lobby ambassador, welcoming and greeting guests."

During slow times, it eliminates the need for a cook in the back and a server in the front. "Instead you've got a mini-prep kitchen in the front where you can offer a limited menu and just have one person on that quiet evening who is both cooking and serving," he adds.

Are smaller hotels here to stay? Absolutely, says Watson. "The only way you can develop new hotels in a big chunk of the market these days and make money at it is to design more efficiently," he explains. Best Western's Hulbert adds, "I don't know that we'll ever go backwards, where really big is really good. After having success with the smaller size, why would you?"

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