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A PASSION FOR HOSPITALITY

A post graduate from IIM Ahmedabad, Chander Baljee, CMD, Royal Orchid & Regenta Hotels is a veteran hospitality thought leader and an expert on owned, leased, managed and franchised hotel models. In an exclusive interview with us, he elucidates on the changing hospitality landscape in India and the need to create new experiences

Chander Baljee
CMD, Royal Orchid & Regenta Hotels

Designing experiential spaces

Hotels and restaurants are reshaping the look, feel and appeal of their properties, using exterior and interior designs as one of the differentiating methods to create unique experiences. Hospitality spaces are moving from utilitarian functionality to contemporary aesthetics and experience driven developments engaging the senses. **By Akshay Nayak**

Historically, the development of lodging areas and facilities has mostly been driven by their physical locations, such as at major business/trading hubs, travel ports and tourist centres (railway stations, etc), or in locations lending themselves to defense, such as forts or castles. Today, while property location continues to be a key consideration, hotel design has moved from utilitarian functionality to contemporary aesthetics and experience driven developments engaging the senses.

The hospitality industry has evolved from a basic amenity to a customised individual experience platform where each hotel and restaurant strives to provide a unique experience to its patrons. Indians are travelling internationally and the global experience and exposure has influenced their palettes and sense of style, design and aesthetics immensely. The internet has also opened up doors to learn about different countries and cultures.

Due to increase in alternate accommodation bookings through a variety of digital platforms, hotels face a fierce competition to win customer demand. With a stronger focus on their overall experience, hotel guests today have higher expectations and the ever-evolving landscape of travellers have brought about a slew of changes within the hospitality industry. It is now becoming evident that hotels are reshaping the look, feel and appeal of their properties, using exterior and interior designs as one of their differentiating methods to create unique experiences. Likewise, restaurants are now designed to give a

wholesome experience to the diner. The concept is ingrained right from the signage of the space to the upholstery, lights and menus. Spaces are designed based on trends, sustainability and international standards.

Agreeing to the notion of changing sentiments in hotel designs, Prem Nath, principal architect, Prem Nath & Associates feels change is the only constant. Evolution is a continuous process and Indian hospitality industry is no different from its global counterpart. "With the world getting smaller by the day, hotels have become much sleeker and smarter; the definition of space has got more defined and the specifications and finishes have undergone a lot of refinement. Modern problems have got modern solutions with things getting more and more digital by the day; with increased security and safety issues, hotel designs have evolved with respect to the access controls, surveillance, etc. - so has automation within the rooms evolved from curtains to mood lighting; to sum it up, the said 'evolution' is fast and for the good," he adds.

Today, design is constantly evolving based on the demand, space, functionality, luxury and location. Sonali Rastogi, founding partner, Morphogenesis, points out, "For instance, the design of suites, public spaces and the very notion of 'luxury' has changed in the last decade itself. It is now becoming highly experience driven as opposed to comfort and functionality. There has been a shift from air-conditioned rooms with comfortable furniture to one where the 'space' itself lends to luxury."

Drawing a cue from Rastogi's 'experiential element' point, Asha Sairam, design principal, Studio Lotus, notes that the primary shift has been one of experience - the modern Indian patron is no longer looking for a hospitality experience that superficially mimics the west, or fulfils a singular recreational brief. "Spaces must provide authentic as well as layered experiences that cater to their target demographic's aesthetic sensibilities as well as functional expectations. Successful hospitality properties are able to complement their patron's lifestyle, which is enabled largely through design - such as in the case of business hotels, that prioritise facilitation of remote working and a life on the go over the typical fixtures of a hotel property," she said.

The restaurant sector across the country is also undergoing a facelift, with more of experiential dining spaces mushrooming in not just the metros but also in the B cities. Interior designer Sumessh Menon, owner, Sumessh Menon Associates, who has designed several theme-based dining outlets in India, reasons it is because of the new generation of customers, widely known as 'millennials'. "They are always looking for that "something more" factor when it comes to dining out, which has in turn compelled interior designers to rethink a restaurant's cosmetics. Large groups, unusual meal times, healthy food options, unique ambience and the opportunity for self-expression are all part of the dining experience for this generation. As designers, it is very important to consider these aspects while planning the design of the restaurant. Today restaurants are so much more than just about food. They are more of an opportunity for social experiences and exploration. The ambience matters, the comfort level and seating styles matter, hygienic facilities matter and even the unique services matter. As per the current trends, the millennial generation prefers large groups and so communal tables with unique seating styles become an instant hit. High energy bars always pull a crowd and in the case of this generation a crowd pulls in more of a crowd," he points out.

"Exotic cuisines, traditional cuisines and fusion food; each evoking a different experience have started defining the design strategy of the industry. This has led to customisation of architecture that briefs the cuisine and enhances not only the dining experience but also the narration of story behind the cuisine," observe Rakhee Bedi and Shobhit Kumar, founding directors, RSDA.

Cosmetic turnaround - The challenge

Though many facelifted structures of hotels and restaurants in India - a developing country for long, are sure head turners, there are many factors which have arrested or made the process of creating unique designs cumbersome. As Prem