

# Hotel Business Review

Best practices, insights & trends

## There's No Place Like Home: The New Paradigm of Hotel as Home

By Rob Rush, CEO, LRA Worldwide



Does anyone here remember when travel was glamorous? Seriously, raise your hand. And I'm not harkening back to the era of the Titanic, when the Astors and Guggenheims went down with the ship and the finely appointed china. I'm referring to the not so distant past, when people actually got dressed up to get on an airplane and staying at a hotel carried an air of exotic mystery.

Bell Service. Room service. Turn Down Service. Alluring elements of the traditional hotel stay, none of them featuring even a whiff of the home front.

Yet, when you step on an airplane these days, you are less likely to get slacks and a dress shirt than a whiff of bare feet and the swoosh of mesh gym shorts; likewise, when you settle into your hotel room, the feel is less escape and more....homey? It turns out that hotels have largely bought into the notion that they can attract more guests by making them feel like they never left home.

The first shot fired across the bow in this trend? After however many hundreds of years of the lodging industry's existence – from rooms above a tavern to five-star resorts – someone finally got the bright idea that the bed might actually be important. Hmm – you've rented a room for the night and sleep might actually be a priority, just as it is the other 364 nights of the year at your home.

Thus, the Heavenly Bed begat Marriott Revive Bedding, which begat the Sheraton Sweet Sleeper, which begat the Hilton Suite Dreams, and so on. It turns out an actual comfortable night's sleep wasn't a bad product feature for a hotel room. And with that realization, the rush to bring the comforts of home into the hotel room was on.

In some instances, the lines between the home and the hotel have become quite blurred, with a reasonable chicken-or-the-egg argument regarding whether home design is driving hotel design...or vice versa. Delta Hotels, Canada's leading hotel management company, articulates the convergence of the home and hotel in a 2005 issue of its employee magazine, Connection:

*"...thanks to shows like Trading Spaces [and] magazines like Canadian House & Home... people are increasingly thinking about good design in their homes. And since our hotels act as a 'home away from home,' we've begun to adopt a more residential look in our latest designs."*

Thus the proliferation of flat screen televisions, attractive window treatments, compact stereo systems and MP3 adapters and stylish clock radios throughout the hotel room landscape. Almost enough to make you want to bring it all home with you. Thankfully, you can, as hotels have identified a new profit center in selling the bedding, furnishings and appliances that lend their properties that unmistakable feeling of home. Predictably, several industry publications have begun to discuss how interior designers can best lend a home the feel of a fine hotel. Clearly, this shifting paradigm is enough to confuse even the most savvy business traveler.

Of course, a true feeling of home involves more than sheets, pillows and gadgets. Lodging brands that are truly committed to pulling off this paradigm shift are seeking ways to redesign the entire guest experience to elicit that homespun feel. Property design, room layout and service models are all being reworked to align around the concept of hotel as home. Without this alignment, the desired experience is in grave danger of being only duvet cover deep, thereby alienating guests rather than making them feel as though they are visiting grandma.

Thus, Marriott is redoing the lobby space in its flagship properties to create more of a family-room feel, allowing for intimate gatherings and workspaces. Essentially, the new design and layouts are intended to create opportunities for "private" interactions (befitting one's home) in what is still a very public domain.

One lodging company that my company has worked with quite closely has gone so far as to determine how they can hardwire "home" into the brand DNA. Basically, this company did some extensive research into its brand oriented towards the business traveler and determined that its guests were craving a "caregiver" while on the road. This discovery spurred the effort to try to create a hotel experience that is the personification of "caregiver" – i.e., what could they do to make the guest feel as if there was a parent or spouse looking out for them on property? The effort – while ongoing – leaves no element of the hotel experience untouched, focusing on furnishings, layout, aroma, service, food & beverage, check in and more.

Now whether their efforts will result in a true feeling of being taken care of...or may just end up feeling somewhat intrusive and creepy ("Why does that housekeeper keep offering me oatmeal cookies?"), depends – as always – on the execution. The concept, however, is sound, as they have fully explored the holistic guest experience in an effort to truly sell the idea of their brand as a home on the road. As with any ambitious brand "promise" of this nature, it is incumbent upon the brand to rigorously measure delivery, ensuring that each touch is authentically homey, at least in the manner in which they have envisioned home. Thus, each lobby needs the proper fan of magazines on the coffee tables, each concierge needs to nurture the weary traveler, and each guest room needs the exact aroma that screams, "I'm home!"

Of course, many of the highest-end lodging brands have really taken the shifting paradigm to heart, capitalizing on a booming housing market to transform properties in sizzling hot urban centers into hybrid condo-hotel developments. In the most literal sense, these brands have ensured that a core of its customers view the hotel as home. (Or at least a nice investment!) Truly, what better way is there to engender brand loyalty and advance the concept of hotel as home – where do you think those condo owners stay when they go on the road? Why, at home, of course.

Whether this latest trend keeps growing in a softening housing market is anyone's guess, but already the condo-craze has morphed to a cruise ship application (where better to find waterfront property!), so who knows what's next? Airplanes? Wait, isn't that sort of what fractional jet ownership is about? Restaurants? Oops, too late – be sure to check out the private "wine lockers" at the fine steakhouse in your neck of the woods. College? Check – in today's competitive college market, the trend is to provide students all of the comforts of home....while being freed from the supervision of home life, if that makes any sense. The cinder block dorm rooms of your memory are just that – a memory. Plus, don't all college grads move back home after they graduate anyway?

Apparently, in an uncertain and sometimes scary world, the concept of home is almost universally appealing. Whereas the thought of "getting away from it all" and leaving home in the rearview mirror used to elicit excitement, we are now seemingly in an era where no one wants to get away from it all, they want to bring the home with them wherever they go.

Except, of course, for the dirty laundry.

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