

TRENDS: HOTELS

## THE HOTEL OF THE FUTURE

As hotels reach out to a new generation of travellers, white-glove service is giving way to laid-back welcomes, signature scents and lobbies that serve as hip community hangouts. Janet Forman checks in

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With its pulsing streets and wild, cloud-splitting skyline, Shanghai has a reputation as the metropolis on the edge. And walking into the new Park Hyatt hotel here feels like time travel. Through the door at the Shanghai World Financial Center - a 101-storey skyscraper with 20,000 inhabitants - is a nearly empty vestibule: A sole concierge awaits you before a massive abstract mural. From there, it's an ear-popping elevator ride 87 floors up.

Here, the open lobby by designer Tony Chi is based on the communal plan of a traditional Chinese home; Shanghainese young Turks hang out and network above the Lilliputian skyline. And in the rooms above, discreet technology is everywhere. Lights glide on as if awakening from sleep instead of snapping open with a mechanical pop, and one simple remote controls all media.

Welcome to the hotel of the future: Connected to the city and culture around it, built with the latest and simplest technology, and full of inviting public spaces. These ideas are emerging as hotels everywhere, from indie boutiques to multinational chains, experiment with ways to attract a new generation.

Joseph McInerney, head of the American Hotel and Lodging Association, says hotels have learned that the priorities of younger travellers are quite different from their baby-boomer elders: "They want things modern, sleek, high-tech," he says. Along with a smaller environmental footprint and better-integrated technology, they're demanding public spaces where they can mix work with a lively social scene. It's a demographic shift triggering profound changes in the design, the service and even the scent of tomorrow's hotels.

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### CHECK-IN

In the most innovative hotels, getting checked in is no longer the ritual it used to be. At the Shanghai Park Hyatt, after the long trip upstairs, you are whisked straight to your room - where a butler awaits to help unpack. ID and credit-card formalities are painless and quick, performed while a hotel assistant helps plug in your laptop and a housekeeper brews green tea.

A few hotel properties are going a step further, completely rethinking the hotel's entry portal. Element Hotels, the new eco-conscious extended-stay properties from the Starwood chain, are installing "smart kiosks" akin to those at airports so guests can check in or out, confirm or upgrade rooms, create keys or print boarding passes on their own.

North America's first Shangri-La hotel, opening in Vancouver on Jan. 24, has eliminated the front desk entirely: Instead of a check-in area, guests are greeted by an atmospheric "arrival experience." Candles flicker amid a thicket of bamboo, while the sounds of rustling grass and the chirp of crickets create a peaceful transition.

## CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Yet the most profound difference in tomorrow's hotels may have less to do with the senses than with the psyche. Many new lodgings see themselves not as anonymous way stations but as gathering spots for like-minded souls. Guests are increasingly "self-assured yet unpretentious," says hotelier Brad Wilson, chief operating officer of the Denihan Hospitality Group.

"The formal 'white glove service' definition of luxury is being rejected in favour of a sense of belonging." What really matters, he says, "is feeling like you're part of a community during your stay."

There's a similar movement in Amsterdam where the boutique Lloyd Hotel, whose room rates range from \$168 to \$756, attracts arty types at every economic level with its "Cultural Embassy," which connects guests to the city's avant-garde music and art scene.

This new tendency toward the social is recasting the hotel lobby into something akin to its forebear of the 19th century, an era that coined the term "lobbyists" to describe deal-makers haunting the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C.

Lobbies shrank at the end of the 20th century when developers felt they devoured too much unproductive space, McInerney says. "But these days, young people who travel in groups of four, five or 10 are looking for places to gather," he observes, "so common spaces are being put into lifestyle brands like NYLO, Element and Indigo."

Michael Achenbaum, head of the Gansevoort Hotel Group, agrees. "Guests want experiences that are thought-provoking, conversation starters," says Achenbaum, whose group is now building Toronto's first condo/hotel certified by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design system. Gansevoort is so committed to the lobby-as-gathering place that it is transforming existing spaces: placing chess tables in the lobby at Miami Beach's Gansevoort South and building a fireplace in the lobby of its New York hotel.

If most new lobbies look pricey and sleek, others take pains to establish a rougher and more local aesthetic. At the style-conscious NU Hotel in downtown Brooklyn, the lobby is decorated with scrap and salvage - found objects that recall long-gone industrial Brooklyn, like the rusted metal letters spelling "YES" from an old oil depot and a generously proportioned 1940s dress form. It's a thematic complement to the views of the Brooklyn House of Detention across the street. Not your typical model of luxury, but Neil Shah, president and COO of the hotel's parent company, says that's the point. "In our hotels, we immerse guests in the unique culture of the neighbourhood," he says, "since we believe our cities are far more impressive than 600-thread-count sheets."

## TECHNOLOGY

While hotels are always hunting down advanced technology, the newest building materials and the fastest Internet connection, they are increasingly aware that tired guests have little interest in studying a manual to turn on the TV.

Larry Traxler, Hyatt Hotels' vice-president of architecture and design, adds that there is a growing demand for "seamless technology." That means computers interfacing with TV, easy access to customized video content, and video in the bathroom. "High-tech is in," Traxler observes, "but it must be user-friendly."

For the Shanghai hotel, Chi says one of his goals was simple: "No negotiation.

"We try to anticipate every decision facing the guest, and make that decision for them," he says. That means everything from broad strokes - like lighting levels - to details like a toilet seat that rises by itself as a guest enters the loo.

Installing the right gadgetry is so important these days that most major chains have test rooms for new widgets, even enlisting the help of academics. Hilton evaluates hardware like shower stalls, platform beds and coffee makers with repeat clients in the "University Wing" of one of its California properties. Marriott actually merges its test program with the academe through the University of Delaware with its experimental "X-Room" at a nearby Courtyard Marriott. Here Cihan Cobanoglu, an assistant professor of hospitality information technology, analyzes a rotating roster of 17 devices including a showerhead that delivers 70 per cent more water pressure with 70 per cent less water.

## SUSTAINABILITY AND HEALTH

While energy-saving techniques are more common across the industry, the idea of environmentalism is so high on hoteliers' radar that some brands have been developed expressly around ecology. Element, whose first properties have just opened in Las Vegas, Houston and suburban Boston, incorporates now-familiar ideas like low-flow rain showers and preferred parking for hybrids. But they also promise shuttles to local farmers' markets, free bikes, an organic grocery to stock kitchens (which have Energy Star appliances), healthy breakfasts each morning - even complimentary weekly barbecues serving organic meats, garden burgers and soy hot dogs.

At other hotels, too, an interest in sustainability often intersects with travellers' concerns about healthy eating. Fairmont's Green Partnership program, for instance, has hotels highlighting organic wines, growing herbs on-site and buying produce from local purveyors. At the Four Seasons Whistler, executive chef Scott Dolbee is purchasing land to grow wholesome ingredients he can't buy from nearby farmers. Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Market restaurant, opening at the Shangri-La Vancouver, will create its vegetable juice essences and herbal vinaigrettes largely from produce grown within 160 kilometres.

If more hotels follow their example, life could get tough for travellers seeking a sugar-and-carb fix after a long day on the road.

## AROMA THERAPY

Some hotels are even looking beyond food and drink, connecting with guests on another sensory plane: scent. Jeffrey Beers, the designer-architect who headed the \$1-billion (U.S.) renovation of Miami's iconic Fontainebleau Resort, feels designers must be aware of every sense to create a truly engaging space. "What was once seen as interior design today extends much further to an orchestration of life," he says.

Now, he maintains, hotel designers "must transport guests through a carefully directed experience where each sense complements the others." The hotel's signature aroma, "The Green Bamboo," dispersed in all public areas except restaurants, is designed to recall a vacation by the sea. Element is equally aware of the power of scent, sprinkling a clean green-tea aroma at its entry. In Copenhagen, the Guldsmeden hotel places candles below containers of organic coffee beans in the morning to entice guests out of bed; and the Shangri-La hotels have their own proprietary scent, a combination of vanilla, sandal, bergamot and ginger designed to evoke their namesake land of eternal peace.

*Pack your bags*

### CUTTING-EDGE HOTELS

#### SHANGHAI PARK HYATT

100 Century Ave., Pudong;

86 (21) 6888-1234;

<http://www.shanghai.park.hyatt.com/hyatt/hotels>. Rooms from \$337.

### ELEMENT HOTELS

<http://www.starwoodhotels.com>

[element/index.html](http://www.starwoodhotels.com/element/index.html). Westin's

extended-stay, eco-conscious brand. Three hotels now open; 22 in planning stages.

SHANGRI-LA VANCOUVER 1128 W. Georgia St.; (604) 689-1120; <http://www.shangri-la.com/en>

[property/vancouver/shangrila](http://www.shangri-la.com/en/property/vancouver/shangrila). Rooms from \$345. The first North American outpost of the Asian luxury brand.

LLOYD HOTEL Oostelijke Handelskade 34, Amsterdam; 31 (50) 317-5510; <http://www.hotels.nl/amsterdam/lloyd>. It connects guests with the city's music and arts scene.

FOUR SEASONS WHISTLER 4591 Blackcomb; (604) 935-3400; <http://www.fourseasons.com/whistler>. Rooms from \$395. Chef Scott

Dolbee grows some of his own produce.

FONTAINEBLEAU RESORT MIAMI 4441 Collins Ave.; (305) 538-2000; <http://www.fontainebleau.com>. Rooms from \$514. The hotel has developed a signature aroma.

NU HOTEL 85 Smith St.,

Brooklyn, N.Y.; (347) 227-4854; <http://www.nuhotelbrooklyn.com/home.cfm>. Rooms from \$215. Boutique hotel in downtown Brooklyn whose lobby is decorated with scrap and salvage.

### GANSEVOORT SOUTH

2399 Collins Ave., Miami Beach, Fla.; 305-604-1000; [www.gansevoortsouth.com](http://www.gansevoortsouth.com).

Rooms from \$469. Part of a luxury

boutique group that emphasizes interactive lobbies.

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