

LIFESTYLE // DESIGN

Hospitality design stepping up to need for personal, authentic experiences

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The George hotel in College Station takes a unique approach to hotel design.

Photo: Courtesy of The George, Photographer

The glamorous Hotel Alessandra opened in the fall of 2017 amid a flurry of selfies and Instagram posts, with bloggers and others scrambling for a seat at the gorgeous Bar Bardot, to book a room and to snap photos of themselves on the grand staircase in the lobby.

Months later, jaws dropped even more when Houston billionaire Tilman Fertitta opened his \$350 million Post Oak Hotel, setting an even higher bar for opulence.

Even smaller-budget projects, like College Station's The George boutique hotel, Rachael Volz's The Revaire event space, the lovely Eunice restaurant in Greenway Plaza or the casual Postino Heights eatery in the highly successful Heights Mercantile shopping center are following the same trend: They're stepping up design in public spaces, with everything from layers of luxurious, high-end materials to creating a signature scent in a candle.

The Omni Hotel in Tanglewood and Lancaster Hotel downtown both were badly damaged by Hurricane Harvey floodwaters, and both opted to modernize and add plenty of original artwork.

Boutique hotels aren't anything new, but even big chains are launching independent hotels that feel hyper-local and exist far out of the realm of cookie cutter projects. Under renovation now is the Doubletree by Hilton Houston Downtown, with architects and designers transforming it into C. Baldwin — named after Charlotte Baldwin Allen, the wife of Augustus Chapman Allen and one of Houston's founders — an independent hotel with more than 350 rooms but with the feel of a boutique hotel.

With multiple projects opening in the past year with celebrity-filled parties and as much paparazzi as Houston can muster, it's abundantly clear that Houston's hospitality industry is taking it up several notches.

"In the restaurant world we expect you to have good food — or at least decent food — and we expect a certain level of service. But now we're definitely seeing the rest of the experience becoming much more important. Atmosphere and design are more important than ever," said Scott Taylor, an assistant professor in the University of Houston's Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management.

That shift is prompted by a number of things, said Taylor, an expert in consumer behavior in the food and beverage industry: social media, television and the selfie-loving Millennial generation.

"It's all about the experience. Nowadays, when it comes to restaurants, everything has to be set up for Instagram, the flooring, the table, the lighting," said Taylor, noting that he's fascinated by HGTV and Food Network shows and how their programming drives expectations.

No longer is it enough for a chef to plate your food beautifully. Attention needs to be paid to the lighting above your table, so that when you take a picture of your food, it will look great on Facebook, Instagram and other social media, Taylor said.

Last March when Fertitta opened his newest baby to its earliest guests and first charity events — the Houston children’s Charity Gala as well as the Houston Chronicle Best dressed Luncheon and Neiman Marcus Fashion Presentation — he said the city needed a first-class hotel.

He spent more than \$1 million on each guest room and filled public spaces with custom-made crystal chandeliers. Staircases and the lobby floor is covered in Italian Calacatta and Calacatta statuary marble. And he spent millions of dollars on paintings by artists Alex Katz, Robert Motherwell, Friedel Dzubas, Donald Sultan, Howard Hodgkin and Joseph Glasco.

The European-inspired Hotel Alessandra already is getting rave reviews, and its interior designers, the highly acclaimed Rottet Studio earned “Best Hotel Interior USA” in Interior Design magazine’s annual “Best of Year” awards just weeks ago for its work on the hotel.

In College Station, two boutique hotels pay homage to Texas A&M University and its military history.

“We didn’t want to be a project that looked like it was poured out of a can,” said Bradley R. Freels, chairman of Midway, the firm that developed College Station’s Century Square, The George and its sister hotel, Cavalry Court. The George opened in time for Aggie football season in August 2017; Cavalry Court opened about a year earlier.

“We’re not interested in being in the commodity business,” Freels added. “If you’re looking for a room, we’re probably not your best option. But if you’re looking for an experience, and you want to get a sense of the town that you’re in, we fit in real well.”

The George and Cavalry Court both were designed, inside and out, with thousands of custom details.

Kelie Mayfield and Erick Ragni, co-principals at the MaRS interiors architecture studio in Houston, were interior designers on The George project, and were responsible for playful touches like the art sheep you’ll find in the lobby and elsewhere in the hotel. There’s a book wall by artist Thedra Cullar-Ledford — Texas-centric books are arranged so the spines resemble the Texas state flag — that’s dedicated to the first lady of literacy, Barbara Bush. The hotel even has its own scent — a soft, woodsy masculine smell — which you notice immediately when you enter and you can purchase in the form of a George candle.

To Mayfield and Ragni, the design of the hotel resembles chapters in a novel more than a place to eat, sleep or drink.

“We like to craft a story in every project we do. Whatever our inspirations are, local context, regional context and the story we’re trying to achieve, that permeates the project,” said Mayfield as she pointed out Yellow Rose Distillery bottles in the hotel’s 1791 Whiskey Bar and nearby metal displays made by Root Lab, a Houston design and fabrication studio. “We take it on as an investigative project, looking at the social and historical issues.”

In rooms, headboards look like something out of an old Pullman train car and steam trunk-style cabinets reveal mini bars inside.

“People are demanding more authenticity in their experiences. You see it even in vacation experiences,” Ragni said.

Rachael Volz, owner of A Fare Extraordinaire catering company, took a bold step when she bought the old Delta Fastener warehouse on Old Katy Road and transformed it into The Revaire, an industrial-chic event space that opened last May with the Mercury Gala.

Her 58,000-square-foot building accommodates her catering kitchen, a warehouse full of party goods, plus event space and lounges for bride and groom preparation. She’s hosted weddings up to 350 people and galas for up to 850.

Last September the Children’s Assessment Center held an amateur boxing exhibition at The Revaire and raised \$1 million with 650 guests. On another night, the de Boulle Diamond and Jewelry store held a dine-and-learn event for 50 people.

The Revaire doesn’t have marble floors or million-dollar art, but it has a stunning steel canopy for grand gala entrances. And it meets the need of young brides opting out of traditional settings like churches and hotels and wanting to reinvent a spare space into their own wonderland.

“It’s in the industry all over, weddings and corporate parties; people have more money to spend and the experience is more important,” Volz said. “Millennials in general are obsessed about the experience.”

Lauren Bailey, co-founder of Upward Projects, the Phoenix-based firm that opened Postino Heights, a casual eatery in the popular Heights Mercantile shopping center, spent nearly an hour recently talking about her restaurant and didn’t say a word about the food or drinks.

Sipping a cup of hot tea, Bailey talked about the ups and downs of renovating old buildings and the tricks to finding the right pickers who'll find unique architectural objects and antiques for you.

“The first Postino (restaurant) was in an old post office in Phoenix in 2001, and that's where the name came from. Back then it wasn't a thing to save old buildings, and no one called it adaptive reuse. It was called 'you're crazy' and 'good luck with that,’” Bailey said.

Bailey's approach is to find an old building with an enormous slice of history — Postino Heights is in an old Pappa's processing facility, another restaurant under renovation in Denver is in a building from 1895 — and capture its past.

Her customers embrace the buildings' authentic history as much as they do the new menus. And while they're there, she expects them to take a photo or two. It's how we roll in 2019.

“People want to tell their own stories — where they are, what they're eating, their adventures — more than ever. Now we have these robust platforms to do that,” Bailey said of social media. “As people tell their story, we're the backdrop. I look around and ask 'where's the moment for people who come in here?' I hesitated to put this wall here because it's hard for people to stand here and take their picture.”

In the downtown Theater District, the 93-room Lancaster Hotel's reinvention involved tapping into Texas art, including pieces by Jay Shinn, whose family now owns the hotel. The once dark and stodgy decor now has a Regency sensibility, a punched-up traditional style with more marble, silver-gray upholstery and larger windows to let in more natural light.

The Omni Hotel in Tanglewood had just remodeled in 2010, but when the lower level and first floor were filled with water, owner Bob Rowling decided to go a whole new direction. Instead of replacing standard hotel decor with much the same, they went with Texas modern style and a residential feel.

The sleek check-in desk has small counters wrapped in copper, against a wall of live moss. In the nearby lobby seating area, the arrangement of sofas and chairs around a fireplace felt more like a home than a place for traveling business executives waiting for a cab or Uber.

That hasn't gone unnoticed by Taylor, the UH professor who said the residential feel is everywhere from major hotels to fast food restaurants.

Taylor flew to London over the holidays and had to check out of his hotel room several hours before needing to leave for the airport.

“I was in the lobby and I had a fireplace in front of me. I was on a couch and had a coffee table. It was like a living room,” Taylor said. “I’m in the millennial generation, and sitting next to people I don’t know is exciting – but my grandmother would hate it.”

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