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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



“Spaces must provide authentic as well as layered experiences”

ASHA SAIRAM

Design principal,
Studio Lotus



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 Sumesh Menon, owner, Sumesh 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



“Millennials look for that “something more” factor, so designers have to rethink a restaurant’s cosmetics”

SUMESH MENON

Owner, Sumesh Menon
Associates



Nath notes, “The world is shrinking and horizon-land is at the diminishing end, lesser space is left for greenfield projects, due to which architects and designers are tasked with turning around an existing property to one that reverberates with charm and awe.”

Agreeing with this view, Klaus Kienzler, studio head design service, Hyatt India, believes that though it is always easier to design a hotel from ground up, that isn't always possible. With limited real estate availability, one has to often settle for giving an existing property a facelift. This is the biggest challenge hoteliers face in designing a modern day hotel - devising the building approach towards an existing structure. Turning old assets into something new, up to date with technology, and to the liking of the evolving mind-set of the traveller continues to remain an exacting albeit interesting task.

“We at Hyatt believe that building a modern design from a brownfield structure doesn't mean compromising creativity, newness and ideation. At the same time, the process doesn't have to undermine the previously built structure. We are always looking forward to collaborating with designers who can appreciate what was built, and at the same time, could assist us

Architects and designers are tasked with turning around an existing property to one that reverberates with charm and awe

in evolving a brownfield project into a new work of art, one that is with the times and representative of the creativity and aesthetic each Hyatt brand stands for,” Kienzler adds.

On the similar lines, Amit Aurora and Rahul Bansal, partners, Group DCA see brownfield projects to be symbolic of the complementary architectural dialogue of past and present. “While historical hospitality environments revolved around shelter and food as resting centers for pilgrimage, the present hospitality paradigm aims to develop an experience that encourages conversation and mindfulness of the outdoor and indoor activities as well as of the visitors and the staff. Such projects promote urban strengthening and encourages revival efforts. However, while designing, the existing elements can be an opportunity or a challenge. The possibility of technology serving mankind to rekindle the lost

shine of our old buildings is a budding promise, but can pose to be a challenge for traditional hospitality architecture in India,” they feel.

According to Deepika Arora, founder, Rosakue and advisor - South Asia, Dusit International, with all building types, challenges in designing modern-day hotels or restaurants lie in making the development sustainable and profitable.

In the Indian hospitality scenario, the increased presence of international brands across segments has led to experimentation over the years with the investment/product profile, i.e. smaller room sizes, limited F&B profiles (from fine dining restaurants to QSR set ups), etc. Hotel projects are mostly invariably budget driven with an objective of achieving a fine balance between the vision, budget, timescale, existing building condition and market factors. “The challenge of turning around a

brownfield project therefore is taking traditional cost drivers and investment/design parameters that are well known and understood for new build projects, and applying them to the constraints of an existing building whilst maintaining the key financial metrics,” Arora explains.

This then involves challenges that include unpredictable investment cost and risk. Shiv Kashyap, VP -Technical Services, India & South Asia, Accor, says, “There might be times that we overrun the planned cost due to inefficient planning. We also have to keep in mind the lifecycle cost of the product - cheaper is always not cheap and expensive is always not expensive. We have to ensure that the cost-effective materials are used. Utility cost minimisation is a key factor and automation and Building Management System (BMS) plays a crucial role as you control only when you monitor. To overcome any challenges, it is important to have efficient and effective teams to help develop future-ready hotels,” he trusts.

The biggest challenge in turning around a brownfield project would be labour. Lack of awareness and education makes it hard even for a talented and hard-working work force to cope with advanced technology. Another challenge is lack of streamlined and transparent



“Customised architecture enhances not only the dining experience but also the story behind the cuisine”

RAKHEE BEDI AND SHOBHIT KUMAR

Founding directors, RSDA



“The biggest challenge is devising the building approach towards an existing structure”

KLAUS KIENZLER

Studio head design service, Hyatt India

