

Sustainable Hotel Design in the Post-Pandemic Era

By **Christine Killion** - April 20, 2021



Anichi-Marriott Autograph Collection (Photo courtesy of Prasoon Design Studio)

As the hospitality industry begins to ramp up following a year of navigating through the pandemic, now may be an opportune time for hoteliers to elevate efforts that address another global crisis: climate change. These crises may, in fact, be linked, according to a [recent study](#) published in the journal *Science of the Total Environment*, which examined global bat diversity and the emergence of SARS-CoV-1 and SARS-CoV-2.

From considering the environmental impact of furniture, fixtures, and equipment (FF&E) to reevaluating their daily operations, hoteliers have many opportunities to incorporate sustainable products and practices into a hotel's design, according to seven designers who shared with *LODGING* their outlook on the future of sustainable design in the industry and how the pandemic has impacted that trajectory.

Opportunities for Sustainable Design

Now is the time for the industry to take stock of its design practices and how they impact the environment, said David Tracz, co-founder and principal of //3877. "With the industry re-thinking materiality in general—such as an increased focus on antimicrobial materials for the post-pandemic world—there's a great opportunity to also re-evaluate what we're doing right and what needs more work in regard to sustainable best practices.

Prasoon Shrivastava, founder and CEO of Prasoon Design Studio, said that in response to the increased awareness of climate change and traveler expectations, sustainability will become the heart of hotel design in the future—whether "eco-friendly resorts in popular leisure destinations or high-rise hotels in urban gateway locations."

Hoteliers today have an opportunity to attract new generations of environmentally conscious guests, according to Samuele Sordi, chief architect officer of Pininfarina. "Younger generations are more aware of the environmental and social impact of their behaviors and are more likely to purchase a product or a

service from a brand that reflects their personal values,” he explained, noting that the global hotel industry is already actively joining forces to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through the International Tourism Partnership (ITP) and the World Travel & Tourism Council, which promote the Hotel Carbon Measurement initiative and ITP’s Hotel Footprint Tool.

Terry Eaton, president and chief curator of Eaton Fine Art, sees the biggest opportunities coming from lifestyle lodging brands—like Marriott International’s Element by Westin (of which Eaton Fine Art is a brand-approved vendor) and Starwood Capital Group’s 1 Hotels—that “incorporate eco-conscious practices for the environmentally aware consumer.” Eaton added that a growing number of other brands are embracing similar eco-conscious initiatives.

Shay Lam, managing executive and studio creative director for TPG Architecture, expects to see the biggest impact in smart building designs and retrofits, “including energy-efficient heating/cooling and clean air systems as well and in energy and lighting such as PoE (Power over Ethernet).” Lam explained, “While it is a large upfront cost, reducing the consumption rates by installing smart building systems will make a large impact on the footprint.”

Amy Conroy, LEED AP ID+C, interior designer for NELSON Worldwide, said that while big-ticket items in hotels—like superior indoor air quality and thermal comfort—can be daunting to think about, hoteliers can also start small to work towards a more sustainable product. For instance, with FF&E, Conroy recommends smart sourcing by using locally sourced materials and products that have features like a high percentage of recyclable content. Additionally, Conroy says hoteliers can apply the increasingly popular “modular” mentality to flooring and other areas, ensuring that parts are “component replaceable.” Even sink dimensions—“they must be big enough for proper washing and for no water spillage, while fixtures can be touchless and low-flow when possible”—make a difference in a hotel’s energy and water usage.

“The good news is hotels are already working toward reducing their carbon footprint by using high efficiency, low energy products,” added Dwayne MacEwen, founder and creative director of DMAC Architecture. MacEwen said that operationally, there are plenty of ways for hoteliers to implement more eco-friendly practices, from composting and food-waste reduction to scaling down single-use packaging and moving to paperless systems. However, more thoughtful design from the get-go—particularly in the construction phase—could have a greater impact. For instance, MacEwen, founder and creative director of DMAC Architecture, sees opportunities in upcycling to limit waste headed for landfills. For instance, onsite of the project, DMAC Architecture salvaged and repurposed pine boards originally used to form a large concrete ribbon as interior wall treatment at Midtown Athletic Club & Hotel in Chicago, and in another example, upcycled wood from pallets into ceiling and wall treatments at the Midtown Athletic Club in Rochester, N.Y. “It’s about being creative with our valuable resources,” MacEwen added.

Adapting Amid the Pandemic

Conroy said that the pandemic shined a light on where people can be more sustainable in nearly every area of their lives. “Sustainability was already on the rise prior to COVID and now it seems like it has pushed a lot of efforts from an ideology to a reality. It matters what and how things are made and applied. Every decision must be intentional and thoughtful to obtain the desired outcome, with minimal impact to the environmental footprint.”

MacEwen believes the pandemic accelerated some sustainability efforts while setting others back others. “With the demand for take-out dining, we seem to be packaging everything for single use. On the

other hand, our hospitality clients have moved to paperless menus, touchless check-in, ventilation systems that improve indoor air quality, sensors that reduce lighting, and heating/cooling demands,” MacEwen explained. As several designers noted, the pandemic also accelerated the demand for locally sourced products and materials, as shutdowns and restrictions around the world complicated procurement.

Lam added that previous hotel staples, like buffets, which contributed to food waste, were halted amid the pandemic, presenting an opportunity to discontinue these practices altogether. “This will continue as COVID warrants the less-is-more model when it comes to how many people are handling a product. Fewer touches mean less exposure to contamination. But most importantly, guests should feel that they always have access and help, even if there are fewer people involved in the process.”

Sordi also noted the significant environmental impact of reduced travel amid these shutdowns. “[The pandemic] has transformed our economies and lifestyles. We have seen firsthand during the lockdown how it was possible to drastically reduce the levels of air pollution in major Asian and American cities, and millions of people have changed their consumption and travel habits as a result,” Sordi explained, adding, “We believe that human activity and ecological stress are the main factors triggering the current pandemic and are the cause of the ongoing climate crisis. We are now faced with the opportunity to create solutions that not only stimulate post-crisis economic activity, but that can accelerate the transition to more resilient and low-carbon economies by supporting local biodiversity.”

The Future of Sustainable Design in Hotels

From his perspective, Shrivastava foresees “opportunities for creating habitable ecological spaces with more outdoor open areas” both on the ground and on terraces offering skyline views. “The end goal is to provide design solutions that are well-adapted to support life on earth. In fact, in the post-pandemic world, we have already started to witness how front-of-the-house public areas and F&B areas are evolving to minimize contact and maintain social distancing, and from this point on, it is only going to evolve further,” Shrivastava explained. “As designers, we look toward nature’s blueprints to bring us a new generation of sustainable solutions.”

Eaton believes sustainability practices, such as collaborating with local and eco-friendly vendors and incorporating recycled materials, will become the norm, but will continue to be driven by budget. “I admire hotel owners who are moving forward with the necessary budget and improvements for eco-conscious standards at their properties,” Eaton added. “We can all make a difference by supporting hotel and restaurant owners who value sustainability and understand the impact that these properties have on the environment.”

MacEwen sees a future where designers continue to make the most of assets that already exist through the adaptive reuse of buildings and repurposing materials. This, he notes, not only helps reduce waste and cut costs, but also adds character and custom design elements to properties. “Given the existing building stock and the vacancies caused by the pandemic, I believe we have a responsibility to be good stewards of our resources, and upcycle those spaces wherever we can,” MacEwen explained.

Sordi sees the adoption of technology in hotels as a key to mitigating climate change, including designing efficient buildings and FF&E; supporting the shift to renewable energy and away from fossil fuels by producing and sourcing renewable energy on-property or procuring near-site renewable energy from partners; and “supporting the transition to electrification of equipment and building an infrastructure to generate, store, and distribute electricity across a network.” Sordi added, “We envision the hotel industry

supporting more projects related to decarbonization and the defense of the local natural heritage in the main tourist destinations to attract increasingly sensitive and aware travelers.”

“The evolution will continue and will eventually be the norm,” according to Conroy. “Sustainability is not a trend. It is here to stay and will continue to mature. People and products are becoming smarter, and there is no question that it will affect our environment for the better.” Conroy encouraged hoteliers to consider LEED and WELL programs not just to boost a building’s efficiency and lower its environmental footprint, but to positively impact the wellbeing of the guests and employees who frequent their properties. “They will elevate hospitality design into a new era that will focus on an approach to be more sustainable and well in the entire life cycle of their business.”

Keep up with the industry.

Subscribe to Lodging Daily News

Christine Killion

Christine Killion is the editor of LODGING.