

Opinions

How will the pandemic stimulate design innovation?

19 MAY 2020 7:35 AM

The coronavirus pandemic will force hotel design to change to be safer and healthier for guests, but those changes will also lead to other improvements as well.



By Amy Jakubowski

There is no question that the coronavirus pandemic will result in significant economic loss and an immeasurable loss of life. But as we've learned from past pandemics and depressions, this unfortunate downturn will spark a wave of innovation that will alter the shape of society and how we live.

During the Black Death pandemic (1331-1353), the poor became wealthier, literacy increased and the birth of modern medicine gave way to science over religion. The Spanish Flu (1918-1919) delivered unexpected social changes that provided new opportunities for women and irreversibly transformed life in the United States. Women grew to 21% of the workforce, elevating them socially and financially.

In addition to altering societies, pandemics have affected personal relationships, the work of artists and intellectuals as well as man-made and natural environments.

The economic fallout from the current pandemic shares similarities with the Great Depression of the 1930s. Fifteen million people were unemployed during that time, while 26.5 million are unemployed today.

However, the Great Depression did stimulate innovation across various fields, such as aviation, film, architecture and design. The modernist movement grew out of the Great Depression, setting the tone for a decade and the following century. Practicality and simplicity championed over the ornateness that had prevailed.

Fast forward, rustic and industrial "shabby chic" took center stage during the financial crisis of 2008, along with a significant do-it-yourself (DIY) movement. Even when money is limited, aesthetic aspirations remain high. Exposed ceilings and pipes, raw concrete floors and exposed brickwork—money saving techniques quickly became an aspirational style.

Good design is more than superficial amusement; it is intrinsically linked to almost everything we do, see and experience. In hotels, there is a direct correlation to generating revenue. Design drives consumer purchasing.

During this unprecedented time, we've had opportunities to examine our health, social interactions and positive impacts on the environment made evident after weeks of quarantine, and our needs versus wants. Collectively, our personal evaluations are laying the foundation for the next wave of innovation that will shape and define our built environments.

Looking at the hotel design trends we've cultivated over the last decade, I think about how this pandemic will shift these trends and how we will innovate in our new reality.

The social hotel lobby is now ingrained in the communities in which they live. Home to the wanderlust traveler and locals alike, they are vibrant, 24/7 revenue-generating spaces designed for a mix of uses that transition from day to night. They're places to socialize, network, relax, grab a bite or just plug into Wi-Fi for a few hours.

Physiologically, being around other people makes us healthier. In fact, 89% of people are happier being part of a community. Although we may be separating the furniture in the interim, our social interactions are intrinsic to our well-being, so will the dynamic of the lobby really change? Will we simply have our temperatures checked at the door by some well-designed device, then proceed to gather and socialize?

Biophilic design connects our inherent need to affiliate and engage with nature in the modern built environment. By integrating patterns and forms of nature into the built environment, we strengthen the human-nature connection. We often experience this through indoor/outdoor connections, exposure to natural light, sustainability efforts and locally sourced materials, interior landscaping,



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water features and natural scents.

The benefits of creating an immersive experience with nature and providing a sense of retreat and wellness, particularly in urban settings, is a trend that will likely continue rising to the forefront.

Sustainability has been trending for decades. Now WELL buildings, the built environment that impacts human health and well-being through air, water, nourishment, light, fitness, comfort and mind, are being designed to work in tandem. Long before this pandemic, there was a recognized need.

As of June 2019, the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) listed only 767 global LEED-certified hotels, which is less than 5% of the global hotel inventory. As of July 2019, there was only one WELL-certified hotel: The Inn at Moonlight Beach in Encinitas, California. Other hotels have designated WELL-designed rooms and meeting spaces, such as the “Stay Well” rooms pioneered by Delos at the MGM Grand Hotel & Casino in 2012.

Will sustainability, planetary health, and WELL, human health, now prevail? Clearly the well-being of a person is intrinsically tied to the well-being of the environment.

It is impossible not to respond to the world around us—it informs us and mandates a response, so we cannot sit idle. Designers are intuitively problem solvers, innovating and shaping the environments we live in beyond aesthetics, so they fit into real human experiences. We are on the forefront of a new reality, and our physical space will reflect that, so we will continue to evolve and innovate as we re-imagine our lives.

Amy Jakubowski, Principal / Creative Director of her own firm AEJ Collective, is an award-winning hospitality design executive with nearly 30 years of experience. Named one of the Top 30 Influential Women in Hospitality and a recipient of a Gold Key Award, the hospitality and design communities have recognized Amy’s hospitality design and leadership acumen on multiple occasions. Her extensive portfolio includes mixed-use developments, hotel repositioning and renovation, new builds, restaurants, residential, retail, spa, gaming, corporate offices, and showrooms, as well as the development of brand prototypes and guidelines. Amy has partnered with most of the global brands.

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