

Future-Proofing Your Hotel For a Post-Coronavirus World

*Short- and long-term strategies
for hotel owners and the Architect's role*

Over the past several decades the hospitality industry has placed continual emphasis on the design and creation of evocative communal spaces. After all, the entire industry exists to serve the intrinsic human desire to gather, celebrate, rejuvenate, and have a good time. Even small hotels were transforming public spaces such as lobbies and outdoor decks into their biggest draw.

Fast forward to mid-March when overnight the Coronavirus completely shifted the mindset of the masses – now, people no longer feel safe in public spaces. It is an undeniable new reality, and no one knows if or when people will feel safe to gather once again.

Those of us in the hospitality industry find ourselves faced with an enormous challenge:

How do we continue to provide comfort, convenience, and social interaction while providing guests with a sense of safety and well-being?

What can we do now, in the coming months, and beyond to deliver a guest experience that will encourage people to check-in again and again?

To tackle these questions, we engaged our internal hospitality think-tank at AO, a group of five partners and principals with more than a century of experience designing and executing hospitality projects throughout the world. We put our heads together and developed a vision for a three-stage process centered on innovations in technology, operations, and design.

Phase 1:

IMMEDIATE STEPS TO INCREASE GUESTS' SAFETY AND SENSE OF WELL-BEING

First, hotel owners/operators should perform an in-depth needs assessment to determine what aspects of current hotel operation require improvement. Cleaning protocols should be intensified and communicated to guests regularly and often, with focus on high-touch areas. Easy to implement temporary signage will provide visual cues that let guests know that sanitation is a priority. Next, reorganize common spaces into more compartmentalized environments so allow guests the option to observe standard 6-foot social distancing recommendations. This can be as simple as moving or removing furniture and altering the layout of the guest check-in area.

We then recommend shifting focus to guestroom functionality and technology in order to accommodate the new ways in which guests will utilize the space. For example, guests may want to work in their room as opposed to in a shared lobby space. Instead of having dinner in the hotel bar, more guests may choose in-room dining options. Rooms should provide work areas, increased technology, and tools to accommodate these types of uses. Finally, implement new guest and employee service protocols that emphasize safety. While a practical consideration, owners and operators can take creative license to make these measures part of the guest experience. For example, bringing back the "white glove" approach when handling guest items upon arrival, providing hand sanitizing stations upon entry/exit, and instead of leaving a chocolate on the pillow, perhaps consider a branded face mask or travel-sized sanitizer.

These recommendations are aimed at providing relatively quick, easy to implement, cost-effective, and flexible solutions that can provide guests with an immediate sense of safety and well-being.

Phase 2:

R&D AND INDUSTRY COLLABORATION TO IMPROVE SAFETY AND SANITATION

Unlike Phase 1, Phase 2 is aimed at developing long term solutions that will benefit the hospitality industry, and society as a whole. We firmly believe solving the Coronavirus crisis will require all fields, sectors, and industries to cross-pollinate and come together to share knowledge and technologies. New innovations are needed across the board in order for people to feel safe enough to gather, travel, and socialize. It's a long list, but we prioritize medical innovation to discover a vaccine; sanitizing innovations to find ways to efficiently disinfect large spaces in cost-effective ways; advances in technology to develop more touchless or voice-activated user interface solutions; and organizational innovations to evolve operations and protocols that increase safety.

Many of these innovations are already in progress and new solutions are being developed every day. We recently saw a public transport company in Shanghai who has deployed ultraviolet (UV) light units to disinfect public buses. While use of low-level far UVC is currently used to decontaminate medical equipment, it is still too dangerous for direct application on skin. However, there is potential to adapt UVC to make it safe to use in HVAC systems or localized entry points, providing a solution to keeping the air free of contamination. Additionally, other industries such as medical, may already be utilizing tools for sanitation that can be adapted for use within the hospitality sector making collaboration and communication between industries even more relevant.

Phase 3:

INTEGRATED DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW TECHNOLOGY

The last phase, and perhaps most important for the long-term success of the hospitality industry, is the implementation of new innovations and technologies into the design of new projects and incorporating them into existing buildings. We envision developing spaces that achieve a way to be alone together. Space planning will play a key role as public areas evolve to offer gathering choices that incorporate semi-private zones and social distancing measures, while maintaining the social dynamics, energy and flow.

Implementation of new technology will include touchless and voice-activated systems, as well as ways to wirelessly connect directly to in-room and guest services. Voice activated elevators, doors, and in-room functions will allow guests to enter the hotel, check-in, and get to their room without their hands leaving their pockets. Hotel-specific apps will allow guests to use personal or assigned smart devices to enter rooms, access amenities, and control functions from turning on the lights to setting the in-room thermostat. Further, in-room media should allow guests to leverage robust and seamless intranet technology to conference, do business, and host virtual meetings.

As noted above, one of the most promising technologies for implementation lies in the evolution of the hotel HVAC systems in order to sanitize recirculating air within buildings, especially in public areas. Evaluating the different filter types, changing outside fresh cycles, and modifying ductwork are options, albeit their cost effectiveness requires evaluation. Finally, modifying some design strategies taken from medical environments and implementing creative solutions can deliver both cost effective and long-term results. For example, implementing next generation antibacterial and germ-resistant wall coverings, surfaces, and FF&E materials.



At AO, we have built our business on helping clients solve their most complex development challenges and are well equipped to navigate each of the stages described above.

We are, by definition, problem-solvers. We are consistently seeking out innovations to improve and maximize design. Thus, AO is uniquely positioned to identify cost-effective and creative solutions, technologies, and products that will provide guests with a sense of safety and well-being. Finally, our teams balanced approach to high design, placemaking, and quality production has delivered, time and again, highly evocative and experiential hotels, resorts, and gathering spaces.

We look forward to collaborating with industry partners to reshape the hospitality experience and create spaces that celebrate life after COVID-19.