



Done to Death

A tired term for stylish lodgings, 'design hotel' is doing the industry no favours, writes architect and civil engineer Manfred Ronstedt.

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Thirty years ago in New York, Ian Schrager launched Morgans, the first hotel to become widely known as a 'design hotel'. In 1984 hotels were categorized either as 'modern' – as exemplified by standardized hotels belonging to big American chains – or 'traditional', such as the so-called 'grand hotels' and the smaller, owner-operated pensions often found in Europe. A room's design and fit-out were of little importance in those days, and anything 'edgy' or 'contemporary' was nonexistent.

'Design hotel' now sounds as familiar to travelers as 'budget' or 'luxury' accommodation. It was coined to describe thoughtfully crafted spaces that followed a theme, went to great lengths to accentuate site specificity, or skilfully interpreted the latest design trends. The category has been abused or misunderstood by many developers over the years, who obviously thought that iconic pieces of furniture (Jacobsen's Egg chair and Starck's Louis Ghost are good examples) and a set of sheer curtains were all that was needed to convert relatively modern lodgings into 'design hotels'.

When we think of 'design' in relationship to hotels, what we really envisage is *new* design, but after three decades of intensive development in the sector, many of the venues that fuelled the original frenzy are passé – and nothing is more outdated than yesterday's ultimate chic.

With so many hotel brands currently attempting to position themselves in the 'design' category, the word itself is of little use to the consumer. It fails to indicate size, location, service, price or quality. 'Budget' and 'luxury' at least provide a rough guide of what to expect in terms of price and service.

The hotel industry is maturing, and like the car industry it has to sell emotions and lifestyle rather than merely a bed and safe shelter for the night. Design can be part of what a hotel has to offer and can reflect its branding, but it can't be the brand. Advertisers can appeal to the public by emphasizing the design of a car or a pair of shoes,

but a product needs more than design to persuade people to buy it. Good marketers know that success isn't found in design alone – that's an overly simplistic notion.

Of course, when a hotel is particularly well designed, it is something to behold. When all parts of a room interact to form a coherent whole, what you have is a kind of art installation. I was reminded of this during a recent stay in Vienna, where I visited the Hotel Topazz and its sister venue, Hotel Lamee. Clearly eligible for inclusion in the design category – cleverly conceived, perfectly appointed, subtly thematic – these hotels have the *je ne sais quoi* required to make a lasting impression. Of particular note are oval windows at the Topazz, where guests can enjoy a room that features 'a bench with a view'. At the Lamee, bathrooms are glitzy stages, complete with heavy velvet curtains that open to reveal the bedroom. Although both are members of Design Hotels, they do not broadcast their affiliation with this network on their websites or in their brochures. It goes without saying that a great hotel is a well-designed hotel. It's not a fact that needs special emphasis. X

Architect and civil engineer Manfred Ronstedt specializes in hotel projects; he wrote *Hotel Buildings: Construction and Design Manual*, DOM Publishers (2014)