

DESIGN WEEK

Local colour

- **Source:** Magazine
- **Publication date:** 04 July 2007
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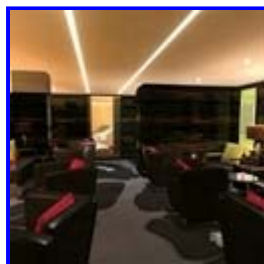
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Business travel sounds like a job benefit until you do lots of it. Then, the stress of travelling, the monotony of ubiquitous hotel rooms and being away from home and family soon become more pain than perk. Hotels are starting to recognise this issue and are beginning to ask designers to deliver schemes that aim to revitalise jaded business travellers. From London to Eastern Europe, business hotels are getting a makeover.



11 of 4 Spa facilities at the InterContinental Hotel Park Lane in London,



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51 of 2 Andel's Hotel in Lodz, Poland, designed by Jestico & Whiles



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7Hilton Manchester Deansgate hotel, designed by Jestico & Whiles

InterContinental Hotel's London Park Lane property is in the final throes of a £76m revamp, which the hotel's director of marketing Simon Scoot says reflects the changing nature of the business travel market. 'Business travel is becoming an experience,' says Scoot. 'It's much less commodity-based; people want more than a comfortable bed, great shower and free broadband, and that's affecting the facilities hotels provide and how they are designed.'

In design terms, this trend is seeing a greater leisure focus in the business hotel market. Designer John Stefanidis is working on Le Richemond, a Rocco Forte hotel that opens in Geneva in the autumn. Stefanidis believes there's now a move for hotels to offer softer facilities such as private cinema rooms, executive club spaces and gym and health clubs. 'There's definitely a trend for providing greater comfort. Spas are becoming de rigeur,' he says.

RDD is one of the groups working on the InterContinental Park Lane revamp, and director Jeremy Scarlett agrees with Stefanidis. Last month, RDD completed a spa for the hotel - the first time the property has offered this feature. Unlike many spa facilities, this space is targeted squarely at a more masculine audience, reflecting the preferences of the predominantly male business travel market. Interiors feature macassar and ebony woods, black glass walls and a colour scheme incorporating olive green, grey and bronze rather than the more traditional pastel spa schemes. 'The average guy feels a bit uncomfortable in a spa so we've tried to create a club-like feel to it with darker, richer colours and make it a bit more dramatic than is usual,' says Scarlett.

Scot says on weekdays he expects 80 per cent of the spa's users to be male. 'The design is very urban, more like a bar than a spa,' he says. 'It's deliberately intended to appeal to business customers who are not into frou-frou design.'

Business travellers' desire to enjoy their experience rather than focus solely on work is leading to another trend - ubiquity of room design is finally on the way out. InterContinental Park Lane specifically employed London-based designers in its revamp and asked them to reflect the city in its interiors. Rooms, by designer Ilana Fiengold, feature a 'timeless English style' and public areas, by J2 Design, incorporate art by local artists. The hotel's general manager Roland Fasel says the aim is to 'share with guests what it is that makes the local culture unique. It's about ensuring each guest has a locally inspired stay'.

Other hotels echo similar sentiments and designers are responding by paying homage to local materials and vernacular architecture. Jestico & Whiles architect Francois Bertrand is working on a series of hotel projects in Poland, Prague and Manchester. 'Clients no longer want the same room in Krakow and Manchester,' says Bertrand. 'We're seeing a demand for more local touches.' The group's work for hotel company Andel's Krakow property has seen it incorporate materials such as Eastern European stone (rather than a traditional Italian marble) and it has also used a mosaic timber veneer, reminiscent of the town's historic buildings, in the reception area. 'We use local materials as far as possible,' says Bertrand. Hotel brands are also being more adventurous with property choice - business hotels based in former factories and historical buildings are popping up across Europe. Bertrand's design for the Andel's Lodz reflects its former incarnation as a textile factory, with interiors featuring unusual textiles that 'reflect the story of the building', he says.

Scarlett agrees that more eclectic design is moving from boutique hotels to mainstream business properties. RDD has recently completed a series of model rooms

for Guoman Hotels - owner of the Thistle brand. 'We're moving away from built-in headboards, units and lamps to a more informal and fresh design where things don't have to match,' says Scarlett. 'It's about feeling more like home; little touches like under-floor heating and getting rid of the trouser press and replacing it with an iron.'

Scot says the changes spread across the entire hotel and even encompass the lobby. 'In the past, a lobby would have had a business centre, now it has a funky bar. People want to check in and have a drink, not check their e-mails. They want to take something home with them from their trip; they want to enjoy the experience,' he says.

It seems changes are on the way. Perhaps one day soon, business travel will live up to the glamour of its billing.

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