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STAYING INN



NEW HOTEL DESIGN

There have been hotels for as long as mankind has travelled... which probably means for as long as mankind has walked. They may not have been called 'hotels', or even 'inns', but the basic concept of one person allowing another to sleep temporarily on their premises in exchange for some kind of payment or reward, is as old as sleep itself. Where we are today, in terms of hotel design, is in some ways a very great distance from millennia ago. But in other ways, not very far at all. Hotels are still basically composed of the same ingredients: a place to lie down and sleep, a place to wash, a place to gain sustenance – eat and drink. Maybe the ways we arrange to find these places, and reserve them and so on, has changed, but the essentials are the same as they've always been. Which in a way, is what makes it interesting. How do you sustain interest, originality, curiosity, aspiration, in a type that is made of the most familiar parts in the world? That's what designers and owners of new hotels have to figure out.

'Decoration' may endure negative connotations in some circles, but it's actually very important. How a guestroom is finished, the colours it sports, the textures of its surface materials, the way it is glanced or doused in light, the quality of the things guests touch... These are all elements of decoration, and they play a central role in the experience of hotel spaces, most importantly in the bedrooms. The location of an inn is crucial, the character of its overall architecture sets the mood, the sequence of its spaces and how guests navigate through the property characterises it and ensures its efficiency. It's a lot more than just a nearby bed for an acceptable price, though it's also that.

Hotels are an exciting design category in part because they combine the 'mundane' in terms of scale, services and amenities (eg bed, shower,

toilet, window, TV, lamp, chair, hangers, heat or air conditioning, curtains, Internet, phone), but also 'rich' in terms of possible extras (eg swimming pool, fitness centre, spa, F&B, views, room service, concierge service, special information, space to conduct business, connectivity, social welcome, transportation, shopping, and so on). The one is extremely constrained; a unit of confined space. The other is as unlimited as the site and budget of the project allow. Thus what designers do with the potential recipe is fascinating. How do they yet again reinvent the basic guestroom – the 'cellular unit' of any hotel – while experimenting with the luxuries of the extras? Does everything mesh perfectly together: huge rooms with extensive facilities? Or do modest rooms get compensated with great public and social areas?

And then there's the obvious question of market category. What is beyond dispute is that hotel design has become, in recent years, as interesting at the low end of the economic scale as at the highest. The world's top hotels and resorts have always been interesting, but nowadays the cheapest inns are also seen as canvasses for design experimentation, for clever ideas, for true originality. In fact, some might argue that the lower financial risks at the modest end of the market allow hoteliers greater freedom to take design risks.

Business travel remains the bread and butter of the industry, and probably will for a long time, unless you count the millions of Chinese tourists roaming the world. But even business travellers have different agendas these days. Yes, they need efficiency, convenience, affordability and the necessary amenities (WiFi, coffee, location, WiFi...). But they are increasingly willing to consider their hotel of choice as a place to hang out in after the day's meetings are done,

or even a place to hold some of those meetings in. This was a logical evolution and an easy step for the hoteliers. Providing a bit of square meterage for meetings, executive floor lounges, bars and restaurants and even simply more spacious and welcoming lobbies went a long way toward nudging business guests to stick around for longer periods of the day. And that meant F&B income, not to mention loyalty across companies.

Luring the inexhaustible pool of tourist guests is another ballgame, and sometimes takes a different property to attract. After all, it's not easy sealing a business deal in the lobby near a rendezvous point for a group of boisterous out-of-towners heading to the shops or temples. Nooks and crannies help. But few hotel chains would dare turn away the business of general tourists anyway, simply for their sheer numbers. Each nationality may have its own identifiable 'quirks' – at least in the eyes (and ears) of other nationalities – but everybody needs a bed to lay down on by nightfall, and every bed comes with a price tag.

It is also probably safe to say that for almost all travellers, save those road warriors who spend so many nights in hotel beds they're truly nonchalant or bored, checking into a hotel is still – always – a tiny thrill. It's the intersection of expectation and actuality, located in a couple of specific moments with geographic coordinates: when you walk into the reception lobby to check in; when you open the guestroom door; when you go check out the fitness centre or bar... Rarely enough, those moments deliver a spark of surprise, when something unfamiliar or pleasantly better is encountered. That, at the end of the day, is what we're searching for.



Tiong Bahru, Singapore Ministry of Design

Photography by Edward Hendricks

The young demographic known generically as “millennials” is becoming the holy grail of marketing efforts across industries. For everyone from fashion retailers to the travel industry and from manufacturers to politicians, this target audience seems to promise the future in its entirety, enshrouded in an optimistic bubble-wrap of intelligent, affluent, connected, worldly-wise youths. Hospitality is no exception. Although the middle-aged business traveller may still pay most of the bills for airlines and hotel chains, the future is about 25 years old, wears skinny jeans, knows a little about most issues – although doesn’t necessarily care about all of them – and has a permanently bent neck from staring down at their smartphone screen. When they venture out into the analogue world, however, they still need an analogue bed to sleep in, and in Singapore, COO is ready with a few.

Situated in the heart of one of the city’s cooler neighbourhoods, Tiong Bahru, this boutique, intimate-scaled property aims for the bull’s-eye of very young clients. Out front on the sidewalk it states its bona fides, with a ‘groovy’ facade design featuring bold graphics and steel and mesh-framed aperture... motifs that also run through the interiors. The mesh leads directly into a lounge/bar space that feels – and this is no accident – like a small club. Putting the primary social space of the hotel right at the front door, and opening widely to the sidewalk, is passive advertising, and taps into non-sleeping trade. The idea is that guests and passersby will use the place like their temporary living room, circa 2016, and slip right in.

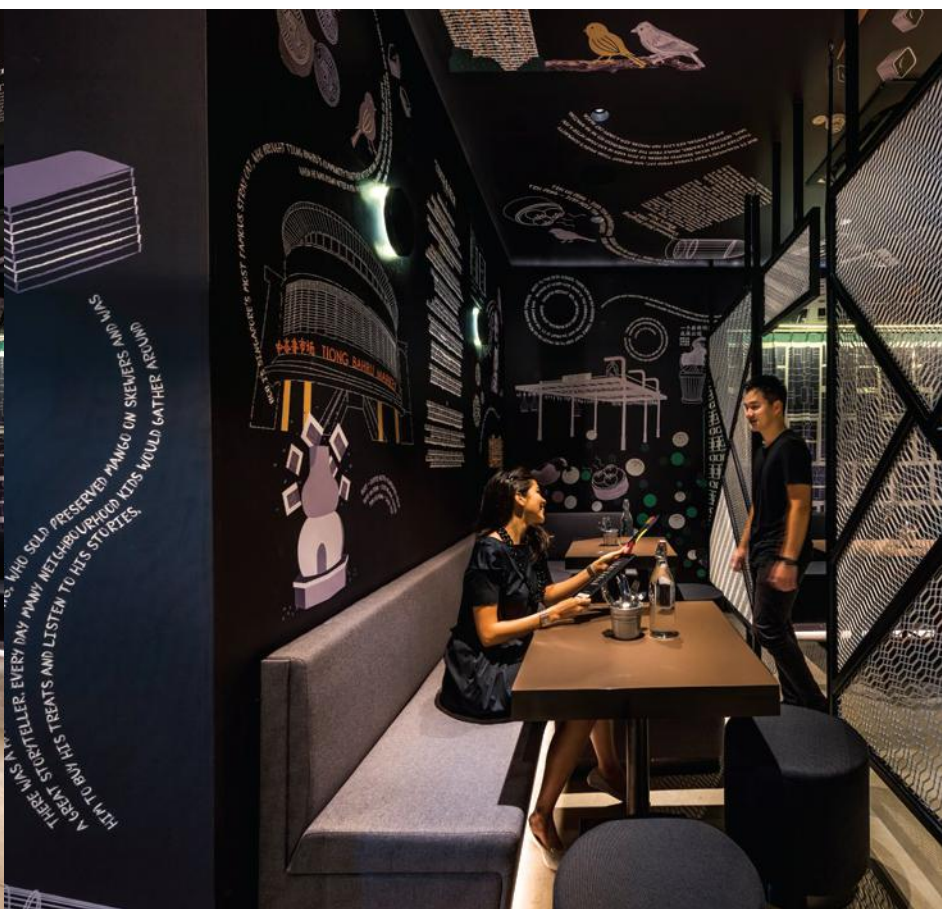
Choosing one of the city’s premier design firms, Ministry of Design, was a no-brainer. And lead designer Colin Seah and his team have provided a very specific palette doused in black, big on graphics, and inventing a bunkbed dormitory system that is condensed but chic at the same time. Well-thought-out cubicles offer spaces for suitcases, paraphernalia, charging stations, safety locker and reading lamps. According to the designers, the central question of the project was, “How can new-gen hospitality experience and engagement be enhanced through digital platforms and social spaces?” So the key here was to somehow blend the digital and physical worlds, which is probably what every parent of teenagers across the galaxy is thinking about.

The assumption with COO was that millennials travel in a different way: “They seek active experience... recognise value, crave authenticity, are digitally savvy and constantly connected.” Now, we could argue for pages about whether “active experience” and “digitally connected” are contradictions, but let’s keep to the design outcome. Ministry of Design came up with a three-pronged answer to COO’s DNA: Glocal, Social, Playful. The brief encompassed graphic design, branding and plenty of details, so that a wholistic environment could be created.

The tonal palette of COO is dark grey and black. High-contrast graphics run throughout, and neon art pieces, such as the glowing map in the bar, liven things up. There are numerous references to the local neighbourhood, from the metal mesh that echoes the gates of old housing estates, to graphic prints of local personalities, pets or architecture.

The refurbished four-storey shophouse housing COO offers 11 dorm-style rooms with multiple sleeping pods that can accommodate up to 68 guests altogether. ‘House rules’ run in large print across walls painted black. Communal bathing areas are tidy and upscale. Witty mottos appear everywhere along with the rules, just to keep things in perspective. On the second floor is a social terrace with pantry and washer-dryer, a perfect place to hang out while doing laundry and meet other guests.









Indeed, social crossover is a big theme with COO. The bistro, at street level, cleverly incorporates a 'private' nook for guests only, adjacent to the walk-in area but still distinct. Here is also served the complimentary breakfast.

One of the genuine innovations of COO is its "Connect" function, whereby guests register their interests online before arrival, and are connected to like-minded guests if they choose. No idea if romance is part of the intention, but don't call it a dating app. It's more inspired by the youth hostels of old, when the charm lay in whom you might meet there, not the iffy sanitation standards. COO also organises get-togethers over breakfast or dinner, where guests can make new friends. If all this feels a tiny bit organised and the bold graphic encouragements a tad forced, remember this is Singapore, where citizens are quite comfortable with social programming, besides organised spontaneity. And if you're going to choreograph social interaction, at least do it well... Which COO undoubtedly manages. Look for other locations as the brand spreads out. After all, there are millennials in the millions.