



Art in hotels paints profitable pictures

Taking the leap to free artistic thinking yields increased guest loyalty, occupancy, and ultimately, profitability.



By [Stephanie Stephens](#)
HNN correspondent

Editor's note: To read how one hotel is adding value and stimulating demand while giving back to local art organizations, read ["Support for arts 'suite' music to guests' ears."](#)

REPORT FROM SPAIN AND U.S.—It's not just an overnight stay anymore. Guests want a more meaningful experience, one that will resonate and add relevancy to the brand. And while many hotels have turned to new services or programs to meet that end, other still are embracing what in the past may have been dismissed as window-dressing—art, according to hotel design consultant Andrea Dawson Sheehan, president of Seattle-based Dawson Design Associates.

The hotel landscape has changed, Dawson Sheehan said, and nowhere is this more prevalent than in the boutique and lifestyle genres that embrace a vivid sense of style and uniqueness. Enough same old, same old—

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Andrea Dawson Sheehan

taking the leap to free artistic thinking yields increased guest loyalty, occupancy, and ultimately, profitability, she said.

Not all properties are as overt as the Meliá Barcelona, at which on Friday, 20 March, at 12:44 p.m.—the exact moment the spring equinox began—artist Dan Arenzon also began digital creations called, appropriately, “Equinox.” He’ll work for six months until 22 September at 11:18 p.m., the autumn equinox, on 144 digital paintings, “living art,” reflecting exterior scenes of the Barcelona property.

While Arenzon represents the far left of the hotel art experience, Dawson Sheehan encouraged hotels to start by inviting guests to simply “get wrapped into the experience of the hotel itself.” Raise the bar high for more value while

maintaining a clear focus on regional and cultural elements that add soul, personality and character. Art instantly communicates “welcome,” especially for the short-timer or a guest who

doesn’t speak the local language. Art speaks to guests in ways they might not have expected—even to those lukewarm about the medium.

With art, “hotels can connect to you personally, to build a friendship with you so you return,” said Dawson Sheehan. Don’t rush to spend a fortune to acquire museum-worthy, fine-art pieces that necessitate security guards or an alarm system. Conversely, she advised against haphazardly hanging “stuff” on the wall. Display your art in a friendly form that feels indigenous to the space, showcasing local artists, potters, even writers who virtually shake hands with the guest and enunciate what’s notable about the local area.

Fair artistic trade

If your budget can’t support a new art collection in the lobby, try bartering. Many artists simply want to be seen and would prefer not to pay a gallery exhibition fee or commission on their sales. Ask an artist whose work you admire if he or she would like to exhibit in your lobby. Most would jump at the chance, and you could sweeten the deal with “trade” of overnight stays or meals in your restaurant. It’s fair to display prices discreetly. Where there’s an artistic will, there’s a way.

Create an identity that tells a story—achievable without huge expenditure, but requiring imagination, she said. Exploration of new concepts can sometimes result in a mental “push and pull” as it challenges owners’ formerly traditional, comfortable boundaries.

Every picture tells a story

While individual, independently owned properties initiated the trend towards hotel art and design, major hoteliers have bravely rolled out their own boutique brands, including Global Hyatt Corp.’s Andaz with its “vibrant spaces,” InterContinental Hotels Group’s Hotel Indigo, “an evolving story,” Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide’s Aloft, which is “always abuzz,” and Marriott International’s new Edition brand in partnership with boutique hotel pioneer Ian Schrager.



A “balancing act” is how Schrager has described the “sensuous vision of artful diversity” in Manhattan’s Haute Bohemian-influenced Gramercy Park Hotel, a property that epitomizes the category of art hotels. Its lobby features one-of-a-kind masterpieces by Andy Warhol, Damien Hirst or Schrager co-collaborator Julian Schnabel. Rooms and suites, with luscious colors splashed on walls, are accentuated by curated photographs and other art objects. In his new Editions brand, “sophisticated public spaces, finishes, design and details

will serve the experience, not drive it,” Schrager said. He promises his characteristic visual edginess, and bets are on he’ll deliver on all counts.

LaSalle Hotel Properties’ Chairman and CEO Jon Bortz doesn’t see art simply as an adjunct

“(It’s) an integral part of high design that can be presented in many different ways: thematic or in relation to a story we’re trying to tell at a hotel,” he said. “That’s what we learned being at the forefront of introducing more contemporary design into hotels. Customers are looking for unique experiences, and design is a big part of that for a lot of people.”



Bortz cited The Liaison Capitol Hill in Washington, D. C., renovation completed in April 2008, as a property showcasing powerful art via six giant original portraits of influential personalities.

Portraits include Mohandas Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher and in the hotel's Art and Soul restaurant, a likeness of President Barack Obama.

The portraits display people who "... were involved in bringing people together or advancing humankind," Bortz said.

Although LaSalle has completed renovations of the bulk of its 31-hotel, 8,500-room portfolio during the past three years, the company's chairman and CEO understands that many owners might defer renovating during the current challenging economic conditions. Still, now isn't forever and hoteliers can plan ahead.

"Art is relatively inexpensive," Bortz said. "It makes a big statement about image. Art can also be what a guest remembers and what differentiates the hotel from other hotels."

It's also not the first item to be cut with budgets. "If we're trying to save money and we get our estimates back and they're too high, we try not to take out the art. We think it more than pays for itself."

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ron golbus

2/28/2013 3:28:00 PM

My firm has had the professional pleasure of working with Ms. Sheehan of Dawson Designs. Her firm specializes in providing the hotel builder and developer a look and feel that new clients gravitate toward in urban settings. Her business skills of identifying the demographics that will drive revenue to the hotel venue her well respected firm has been hired to accomplish is known throughout the hospitality industry. On several occasions, my firm Graphic Encounter, has provided original works of art for the public areas of her projects. Sincerely, Ron Golbus

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