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GENIAL Design: A System for Improving Guest Satisfaction with Hospitality Design

Abstract

Over the past decades, hospitality design has lost sight of its basic goals of providing the guest with safe, pleasant, convenient accommodations and providing the owner with a facility which can be operated efficiently and profitably over the life of the structure. The author offers the acronym GENIAL, Guest, Environment, Needs, Interiors, Accessibility, and Long-term, as a means of keeping owners, developers, managers, and designers aware of the desired goals of the facility throughout its design and development. The author believes that the use of this acronym will promulgate designs more attuned to guest and owner/operator needs, resulting in increased guest satisfaction and increased profitability.

Keywords

Eric F. Nusbaum, GENIAL Design: A System for Improving Guest Satisfaction with Hospitality Design, Lodging, Hotel room, Guest satisfaction

GENIAL Design: A System for Improving Guest Satisfaction with Hospitality Design

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Over the past decades, hospitality design has lost sight of its basic goals of providing the guest with safe, pleasant, convenient accommodations and providing the owner with a facility which can be operated efficiently and profitably over the life of the structure. The author offers the acronym GENIAL, Guest, Environment, Needs, Interiors, Accessibility, and Long-term, as a means of keeping owners, developers, managers, and designers aware of the desired goals of the facility throughout its design and development. The author believes that the use of this acronym will promulgate designs more attuned to guest and owner/operator needs, resulting in increased guest satisfaction and increased profitability.

There are many difficult situations facing the hospitality industry as we enter the 1990s, situations as diverse as the shortage of managerial and hourly staff; liquor liability, terrorism and its effect on tourism, and tax reform. They have received extensive coverage in the trade press, at seminars, and at this Congress. There is, however, another situation which will impact upon our success, one which to date has been largely ignored, that of failing to meet the expectations and needs of guests. This results in decreased guest satisfaction and a lack of confidence in our ability to serve our guests, which must ultimately hurt sales and profits. There is an almost universal tendency to devote efforts and dollars toward creating corporate monoliths rather than toward meeting the basic and essential needs of guests.

James J. Kilpatrick, a syndicated columnist, like many business executives, spends a great deal of his time traveling. (In 1986 he spent 122 days on the road). Unlike most travelers, Kilpatrick keeps a scorecard on the hotels he stays in. Once a year his hotel experiences form the basis of a column. In past years, Kilpatrick has discussed what the business traveler wants from a hotel in terms of a warm welcome, easy check-in, and reasonable accommodations. In his December 9, 1986, column he turned his attention to the hotel room itself. "Hotel rooms these days are designed by designers who never have stayed in hotel rooms. These birds do not read books; they do not make

business telephone calls; they do not take hotel showers." After mentioning a number of poorly designed hotels and a few well-designed hotels, Kilpatrick concluded, "On the road you win a few, you lose a few. If the room designers would only give us good lights, big towels, firm pillows, portable hangers and sensibly placed telephones, the rest would be up to good managers and pleasant staff."

We may not often see criticisms like Kilpatrick's in print, and we may not often hear them, but such criticisms do indeed exist. Individually we can all remember hotels we've stayed in the design of which was so inappropriate as to be memorable. Some have no electrical outlets in the bathroom, bathroom lighting levels inadequate for shaving or applying make-up, shower heads placed so low that a six-foot-tall individual could not wash his hair, rooms advertised as being wired for personal computers where the plug was at baseboard level behind the dresser, desk chairs which didn't fit under the desks, climate controls which one had to be a contortionist to reach; the list of horror stories can go on forever. In cases such as these, will the glass elevators within the soaring atrium which takes us to the roof top and lobby bars overlooking the indoor waterfalls and pool make up for the hotel's inability to meet the basic needs of its guests? Will the guest who experienced problems caused by design faults return to these hotels? Why then haven't we seen our sales and profits adversely affected by these shortfalls? Perhaps it is because we've universally copied them from hotel to hotel; we've all followed the lead of Holiday Inns in putting two double beds in each room, Hyatt's lead in building atriums, and Sheraton's lead in establishing tower rooms and concierge floors. There is reason to believe that while our marketing people seek to segment the market, our designs seek to homogenize it.

GENIAL Design Has Guest in Mind

Guests can select the brand, color, location, and style of the mousetrap, but generally a better one doesn't exist. This situation can be remedied by a concept called "GENIAL Design," the letters of which stand for Guest, Environment, Needs, Interiors, Accessibility, and the Long-term. This acronym stands for four things: first, meeting the guest's requirements for lodging; second, representing the image of the welcoming, pleasant host; third, encompassing the range of guest requirements, and, finally, being compatible with the hotel's long term needs for success and profitability.

Most of us are familiar with concepts such as feasibility studies, which examine the economic potentials for a facility based upon expected sales and costs, and market analysis, which examines the sources of business in terms of segment source and potential competition. The concept of GENIAL design is intended to take us beyond just numbers and consider the people behind the numbers, the guests, the employees and managers who will interact within these hotels. We must keep in mind the needs of the owner/developer, and design hotels in such a manner as to maximize the long-term profit potential. This requires that we consider future maintenance, energy, and staffing

costs from the very beginning of the design process. Indeed, function must be the start of the design process.

An examination of this concept must begin with the "G," the guest. Without a firm understanding of whom we're trying to accommodate, we will surely fail to design and develop successful properties. Demographic profiles of guests, as well as an indication of the purpose of their visit, will provide us with a wealth of information which we can use for developing appropriate facilities. An indication of the amount of time they'll spend in the room and what they'll do there will allow us to design, furnish, and illuminate the room appropriately, as well as give us an indication of proper aesthetic conditions. We should also be aware that we may have guests with physical, audio, or visual impairments and take their needs into consideration as well. Guests with audio impairments may need such special features as visual doorbells and fire alarms, while physically impaired guests may need lowered security peepholes, more open space for circulation, and speaker phones. The more we know about our guests, the better we'll be able to design a facility which will satisfy them.

Environment Involves Four Factors

The "E" stands for environment and has four factors. Is it conducive to the guest's psychological and emotional state? This is a difficult factor to judge because the spectrum runs from soothing to stimulating and changes from guest to guest, and in resorts may change from season to season. An understanding of demographics and purpose of the guests' visit would help us understand their needs. The business traveler wants to unwind after travel, but not so much as to be unable to complete preparations for the next day's activities, while family vacationers may just want to unwind.

A second consideration is the internal climate environment. We're all familiar with heating and air conditioning considerations, but there is increasingly a need to also be aware of humidity, air quality involving the presence of chemicals, smoke, fibers, radioactive gas, pollens and dust, and even background sound. Whenever possible, allowances for natural ventilation should be made. While some air movement is desirable and necessary to ventilate the room, the creation of a draft-free space is another environmental consideration.

A third area of concern is the environmental fit between our facility and its surroundings. We need to be sure that our structure's exterior is appropriate to other visual elements in the area and that appropriate transitions are made from surrounding property to our property and from the exterior to the interiors. The first fit allows our property to become an integral part of its surroundings, while this last factor prevents the guest from becoming bewildered and confused upon entry.

Finally, we should revive the sense of environmental concern which came out of the ecological movement and be sure that we minimize the effects of our construction and operation on the elements

of our environment, the water, the air, and other resources. To this end we should seek to optimize energy efficiency not blindly, but rather on a basis of sound financial analysis. We should attempt to minimize the generation of solid and fluid wastes and process them in the most ecologically sound manner. Resort operations may want to investigate the possibilities of generating energy from waste using new technologies, thereby saving on energy costs and reducing solid waste generation.

Guest Needs are Physical, Emotional, Psychological

The "N" relates to the guest's needs, specifically in the room and generally within the property. When we discuss the items that the guest needs, we are talking primarily about physical items related to the daily activities of living; beds, chairs, bathrooms, dining spaces, telephones, and lights, but should not forget the guest's emotional and psychological needs. Considering that we and our guests have a high degree of familiarity with these physical items, one should be dismayed to learn and observe how poorly we supply the items necessary to meet these basic needs. Since our guests are so familiar with these items, they are likely to be more aware of this aspect of hotel design and to be especially critical of errors in the room design, furniture selection, and placement.

The minimum activities in the guest room involve undressing, washing, dressing, and sleeping. Additional activities include use of the telephone, reading, watching television, doing work of some sort, socializing, relaxing, and, perhaps, some sort of physical fitness activity. The exact processes undertaken in these tasks are very much a function of the identification of guests, the reason for their travel, and the length of their stay. The more we know about our guests, the more likely it is that we will understand their needs and be able to supply them with the physical facilities they require.

Outside the guest room another area of guest needs is the facilities within the hotel, including restaurants, lounges, meeting spaces, lobby, and recreational facilities. The principals of GENIAL Design apply here too.

The guest may also need certain services such as bell staff, valet, telephone, message, secretarial, and concierge services. The hotel should stand ready to provide services appropriate to its location, price, and perceived service level.

In the hierarchy of needs developed by Maslow, security is number two. This need has long been recognized by innkeepers and enforced through common law. Today we're seeing the security aspect become a more important part of the innkeeper/guest relationship. This is true because of the increasing number of lawsuits alleging a breach of the old dictum, "a safe premise and the premises safe." New security awareness and technology facilitate protection of guests. We should be especially aware of the security needs of the increasing number of female travelers.

The guest needs to feel that his room is safe from the threat of fire as well. Every few years a major hotel fire, claiming many lives, reminds us of the fact that there are approximately 9,000 hotel fires a year. After these tragedies, an awareness of fire safety arrives as a blush on the industry's collective face and passes almost as easily. Certain businesses now require that employees seek out safe accommodations. Insurance companies send inspectors to visit potential meeting sites and require a satisfactory report in order to allow employees to stay at a specific property. Increasingly cities and states are tightening their fire codes and requiring compliance not only in new structures, but in existing ones as well. There are improved technologies which permit us to build, finish, and even furnish guest rooms with fire retardant materials, technologies which are becoming increasingly more price competitive. Rising insurance premiums and risk of post-incident legal action will further spur the use of these products.

Interiors Should Be Unique, Inviting

The "I" reminds us to consider the interiors of structures and guest rooms. We want them to be psychologically warm, inviting, physically comfortable, integrated into the structure and surroundings. In the days of the great hotels, it was said that the hotel was everyman's palace, more opulent and comfortable than his home. Somehow the industry got locked into a fad of vinyls and pastel colors which resulted in a cold, impersonal, institutional look. Much has recently been written about the return to a residential atmosphere in both the quality of furnishings and the choice of colors. Several interior designers have stated that this is because the guest desires that the warmth and intimacy of the home be expressed in the lodgings and that the guest is seeking different lodging experiences and decor packages. The remarkable success stories of country inns and bed and breakfast establishments are similarly fueled by the guests' desire to experience the unique and intimate feeling that is found throughout these facilities. The lobby and public spaces should be in synchronization with the guest rooms and provide for appropriate transitions.

There is another component to the "I" which expresses that commitment of GENIAL Design to go beyond numbers, rules of thumb, and standard design features. It is a personal component. As you review a design, put yourself in the shoes of your guest and your employee. Once you've designed and built your model rooms, move into them for a week and see if they "work"; see if the room can be cleaned and maintained effectively. Look at the room you've created from the viewpoint of others. As a guest can you really say, "I would be comfortable and enjoy staying in this room"? Will your employees be able to say, "I enjoy working in these surroundings and things have been placed so I can do my job efficiently"? If you can't answer affirmatively to both of these questions, your room should be redesigned.

Accessibility Has Broad Considerations

The "A" keys us into considerations of accessibility. This word is

often used to describe the considerations of the special needs of the handicapped. We're likely to see more on the subject of providing accommodations which are barrier-free to those with mobility, audio, visual, or mental impairment. There are, of course, special accommodations that these people need, levers instead of knobs, grab bars in the bath, visual fire alarms, speaker telephones, peepholes placed at a lower level, and lighting and climate controls which are accessible, to name but a few. In talking about hotel and restaurant accommodations with people with impairments, one finds that codes do not necessarily cover all appropriate aspects, nor are they necessarily applied correctly. Many designers and architects are unfamiliar with the application of codes to our industry. Government figures indicate that more than 10 percent of our population can be legally classified as "disabled." It is simply bad business to exclude these potential customers because of designs which create barriers to their entry or usage of the facilities. You can seek out local accessibility advisors during the planning and design process so accessibility can be planned and built in to every facility.

The typical guest often finds the placement of controls, switches, and electrical plugs inconvenient. Guest room lighting and phone placement is often inappropriate. We would do well to look back to our guest profile, determine who our typical guest is, and then review the anthropomorphic data on our guests. Anthropomorphics is the study of average human dimensions, such as height and length of reach, attempts to set guidelines for designing items which most people can comfortably work with. Such guidelines will allow us to select furniture which the majority of our guests will find comfortable and will allow us to place fixtures and controls in appropriate and accessible locations.

Plumbing, space conditioning, and built-in systems should be accessible for the repair and maintenance staff. The entire space should be easily accessible for the housekeeping staff and their equipment as well. Supply and storage closets should be easily reached.

Long-Term Considerations Can Be Profitable

The "L" stands for the long-term. From a business standpoint first and foremost must be the profit motive. Many of the items mentioned here may be more expensive to install initially, yet they will prove to be more efficient to operate and to cost less when looked at in terms of the life cycles of the products. The system of analysis called life cycle costing which looks at initial costs, annual operating costs, and future replacement costs in light of the time value of money and cost of capital is well-suited to this type of analysis. In addition to basic financial considerations, one needs to view design in terms of the potential for changing tastes and needs. The shrinking family unit may no longer need two double beds in every room, and the trend to shorter vacations will change the concept of resorts.

Mass media communication has decreased the amount of time it

takes ideas, concepts, and designs to travel around the world. As a result of this and a desire by some in the media to be the "discoverers" of the new trendsetters, we have seen styles in most of the visual arts changing at a more rapid pace than ever before in the history of man. What is new, current, and up-to-date one year is often out-of-date, inappropriate, and so over-used as to be trite the next year. It is vitally important that designers in the hospitality field make sure that the designs they choose are ones with which the customer will feel comfortable over the life of the design's usefulness. We must not allow designs to be dictated by the columns of newspapers heralding what's in and what's out.

There remains a question of the long-term needs of the guest. Since hospitality facilities are not inexpensive to build, nor are they easily portable or changeable, we must be sure that the market for which we are developing facilities will be around for a reasonable period of time. This is a function of guest demographics, guest travel motivators, and guest expectations. A successful design becomes a classic design; it will last for many years and will not become dated. A return to the basics of designing for guest needs rather than for corporate egos might contribute to the development of new hotel classics, hotels that guests will continue to stay at and which will continue to generate revenues for years to come.

For many years, some hotel developers have been primarily interested in speculating on the value of the property of the hotel. This has not necessarily improved the quality of the design from a standpoint of operating efficiencies. The new tax law reduces the attractiveness of real estate speculation and increases the importance of GENIAL Design. The emphasis is now on maximizing operating profits. A facility designed with respect to Guest, Environment, Needs, Interiors, Accessibility, and the Long-term is likely to provide high levels of revenue at lower cost levels.

There is no element of GENIAL Design which precludes design warmth or creativity. The basis of GENIAL Design is that before we make our facility beautiful, we must make it functional. A functional, profitable property can easily be made aesthetically pleasing. Kilpatrick and many millions of other travelers can be provided with comfortable, convenient, safe, and enjoyable lodging while owners and operators can have attractive structures which can be operated profitably over the long term. These goals are not mutually exclusive, but are integral components of the GENIAL Design concept. If we start now, we may be able to handle this situation before it becomes a topic for the trade press, seminars, and conferences.