

# FOSTERING CULTURAL CONNECTION AND SUSTAINABILITY IN MODERN HOTEL DESIGN

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**Abstract:** *The architecture and design of modern hotels extends beyond aesthetics and can play a crucial role in reflecting and honoring the local culture of host destinations. It can serve as a means for preserving the local culture while simultaneously supporting sustainable tourism development. This research paper explores examples of how various hotels incorporate elements of local culture, lifestyle, and environment into their architecture, landscaping interior and exterior design. By examining case studies of such hotels, it becomes evident that some businesses choose to prioritize authenticity and immersion, offering guests a deeper connection to the places they visit. In today's tourism landscape, travelers seek more than just comfortable accommodations, they yearn for meaningful experiences that allow them to engage with and understand the local culture. As a result, hotels are moving away from standardized approaches and instead embracing the unique characteristics of each destination. This shift not only enhances the guest experience but also fosters a sense of respect and appreciation for local communities, aligning with principles of sustainable development. By integrating local elements into their design and operations hotels can contribute to the celebration of cultural heritage while also benefiting from increased guest satisfaction and loyalty. To facilitate this connection with local culture, this publication provides recommendations for hotels seeking to enhance their design and offerings. These include strategies such as collaborating with local artists, incorporating indigenous materials, hosting crafts fairs and providing authentic cultural and culinary experiences. By implementing these recommendations, hotels can create environments that truly embody the spirit and essence of their destinations, enriching the overall travel experience for guests while also contributing to the vitality of local communities.*

**Key words:** Hospitality; local culture; sustainability; hotel design; authenticity

## Introduction

The hospitality industry is going through a transformation, in which hotel architecture and design is changing to accommodate the evolving visitors' expectations and requirements. Authenticity and sustainability have become important factors in the choice of a destination, accommodation and tourism activities by travelers worldwide. Today's tourists look for a genuine immersion into the traditions, culture and true social nature of the places they visit. From visiting local craft shops to participating in small regional festivals and meeting the farmers who provide the products for their meal, modern travelers want to become part of the community and spend time living as the locals do. This change in preference highlights the significance of authentic experiences, urging hotels to leverage the richness of local culture and heritage to provide guests with an unmatched voyage. Offering local experiences isn't just a trend; it's the future of travel (Younadam, 2023). Hotel managers have acknowledged the significance of design as a strategic asset for standing out and engaging customers amidst this changing environment. When planning hotel designs, architects and designers consider physical elements – such as traditional architectural styles, building techniques, and locally-sourced materials – as well as the cultural context – customs, traditions, and the community's

social dynamics. Local and cultural elements can help create a sense of place and authenticity, make the guests' experience more memorable and promote sustainable development by protecting the cultural and historical heritage.

Authorities and scholars in Europe and around the world have often discussed the connection between culture and sustainable development (The Council of the European Union (2014), Hawkes J. (2001), Duxbury & Jeannotte (2010), Vila et al. (2021), Verina N. et al. (2021), Naibei P. (2014). Culture is considered as the fourth pillar of sustainable development and is used as a tool to implement the Sustainable Development Goals.

In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development echoed that culture and cultural policies are crucial to achieving at least 9 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the transformational agenda as a whole (European Commission, 2022). The call for culture is becoming more powerful along with the increasing ecological, economic and social challenges to meet the aims of sustainability (Niabei, 2014). Sustainable Development interventions that are responsive to the cultural context and the particularities of a place and community, and advance a human-centered approach to development, are most effective, and likely to yield sustainable, inclusive and equitable outcomes (Hawkes, 2001).

The **object** of research in the paper is the mod-

ern hotel design practices that incorporate local culture and promote sustainability. The **subject** of research is the relationship between culture, sustainability, and hotel design and the process of integration of cultural elements into hotel design. The **aim** of this paper is to explore the significance of fostering cultural connection and sustainability in modern hotel design, with a focus on leveraging local culture and heritage to create authentic experiences for guests. The **research tasks** set by the author include examining the relationship between culture, sustainability, and hotel design, providing good examples and identifying effective strategies for integrating cultural elements into hotel architecture and interiors, and assessing the impact of these design choices on guest satisfaction and environmental sustainability. The publication seeks to provide insights and recommendations for hotelier managers and designers to create more culturally rich, sustainable, and memorable hospitality experiences.

### Cultural aspects of the global sustainability targets

Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015 and outlines the path to sustainability until the end of the current decade (United Nations, 2015). The previous version of the document included the Millennium Development Goals pursued from 2000 to 2015. The new 2030 Agenda includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 specific targets. It is truly a global timeline whose goals and key topics should be followed in all countries and regions. The 2030 Agenda represents a step forward in addressing cultural aspects in sustainable development.

Jyoti Hosagrahar – Director, Division for Creativity in the Culture Sector at UNESCO, points out that the safeguarding and promotion of culture is an end in itself, and at the same time it contributes directly to many of the SDGs – safe and sustainable cities, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, the environment, promoting gender equality and peaceful and inclusive societies (UNESCO, 2017). The indirect benefits of culture are accrued through the culturally-informed and effective implementations of the development goals. Cultural heritage – both tangible and intangible – and creativity are resources that need to be protected and carefully managed. They can serve both as drivers for achieving the SDGs as well as enablers, when

culture-forward solutions can ensure the success of interventions to achieve the SDGs.

According to the Executive Bureau of United Cities and Local Governments “culture ultimately shapes what we mean by development and determines how people act in the world” (Verina et al., 2021). Although none of the 17 SDGs focuses exclusively on culture, the resulting Agenda includes several explicit references to cultural aspects and some elements are particularly worth noting (UCLG Committee, 2018):

- Target 4.7 refers to the aim of ensuring that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for global citizenship and the appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.
- Target 8.3 addresses the promotion of development-oriented policies that support productive activities as well as, among others, creativity and innovation.
- Targets 8.9 and 12.b refer to the need to devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism, including through local culture and products, and to the need to develop suitable monitoring tools in this area.
- Target 11.4 highlights the need to strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage.

Cultural factors are a crucial aspect in the 2030 Agenda’s success. Creativity, diversity, cultural rights, and legacy are essential elements of human and sustainable development. As the Preamble of the 2030 Agenda indicates: “We acknowledge the natural and cultural diversity of the world and recognize that all cultures and civilizations can contribute to, and are crucial enablers of, sustainable development” (UNESCO, 2017).

The significant link between culture and sustainability is also recognized by the European Union. In May 2022 the Council of the EU added ‘Culture as a driver of sustainable development’ as a priority to its 2019-2022 and 2023-2026 work plans for culture. The experts formulated 11 messages with the goal of rethinking the relationship between humans and nature to fuel cultural imagination for a liveable, sustainable future. The report states that culture in all its forms, expressions and meanings, must be at the heart of any transformational path for human development (European Commission, 2022).

### **The role of hotels in cultural connection**

Hotel managers are aware that it is necessary to ensure the constant development of the tourist properties, ensuring consistency between the natural (real) and the man-made (artificial) material environment together with the socio-cultural environment of the tourists (Velikova, 2017). The future of the hospitality sector doesn't just rest on providing accommodation and standardized services and experiences but on its ability to become a vibrant hub for cultural innovation and conservation. Through the concepts of design hotels have the potential to become active participants in preserving and promoting local arts and culture.

Design can be viewed and evaluated through the prism of cultural aesthetics. These aesthetics include design components, color schemes, and fashion trends that are symbolic of a particular community. To design hotels that feel unique and interesting, planners shouldn't just think about how the building looks (architectural styles, materials) or how it's put together (building techniques). They should also consider the local culture and community aspects. Architects and designers respond to this need by taking into account both the tangible aspects, like local construction methods, classic architectural styles and locally-sourced materials, and the intangible aspects, such as traditions, social norms and interactions, and local heritage. These factors improve user experiences and create a welcoming atmosphere that encourages guests' interest and sense of belonging. By incorporating these local touches, the hotel feels more like it belongs where it is and offers guests a more authentic and unforgettable experience.

Every design decision can contribute to the inclusive ambience, encouraging guests to explore a diverse blend of cultures while fostering a sense of comfort and connection (Designers-Group, 2023). For example certain cultural nuances can be woven into the fabric of hospitality spaces in ways that quietly speak of communal living or draw inspiration from nature's elements. These and many other subtle influences discussed in this publication serve as a bridge, connecting individuals through shared experiences, emotions, and a collective appreciation for the multifaceted beauty of the culture.

### **Ways to highlight local culture in hotel design**

In order to thrive, a destination needs to set itself apart from competitors. Hotels strive to achieve this by distinguishing themselves in various aspects such

as ambience, services, amenities, decor, design, and the integration of local cultural branding (Lee, 2011). To successfully differentiate from other destinations with similar attractions, hotels must incorporate the unique characteristics of the local culture. The sense-of-place can impact various aspects, ranging from the overall landscape and architectural structures to interior designs and even the smallest details of furnishings and decorations.

According to the "Rise of Local in Hospitality" report by Skift Research (2013), hotels have undergone a transformation in response to the increasing popularity of experiential travel. Rather than merely providing accommodation, a growing number of hotels are positioning themselves as immersive travel experiences. The report gives some examples of how hotels are forming partnerships with local businesses to foster stronger connections with communities, are expanding their offerings by hosting a variety of special events and are including local foods in their menus for creating authenticity in the guest experience. Below are some methods hotels can employ to leverage local themes and attract travelers:

#### *Emphasizing local culture through art*

One approach to emphasizing local culture involves showcasing works by local artists. Art is increasingly becoming a focal point of hospitality design (Jorden, 2023). Art curation can serve as a significant method to celebrate local activity, particularly for travelers seeking an entry point into the local scene, as noted by Mia Nielsen, art curator at The Drake in Toronto in an August 2018 Skift article (Powell, 2018). Hotels are increasingly prioritizing collaborations with local artists, integrating unique and thought-provoking artworks throughout their spaces. This strategic incorporation of artistic expression not only imbues the hotel with a distinctive character but also fosters dialogue and engagement among guests. From hand-woven textiles draped over furniture to intricate murals painted on walls, local art can transform generic hotel spaces into lively cultural exhibits (Younadam, 2023). These art pieces not only enhance the visual appeal but also narrate stories of the locale, making guests feel more connected to the destination.

#### *Connecting visitors with local artisans*

Through organizing workshops where guests engage directly with local artisans, hotels facilitate a connection between tourists and the local community. These encounters frequently cultivate a

greater admiration and understanding of the native craft, transforming the hotel stay into an enriching educational opportunity. This distinctive selling point not only sets a hotel apart from its rivals but also leaves a lasting impression on guests, making their stay memorable.

#### *Cultural storytelling*

Considering the cultural context that surrounds a hotel site, architects incorporate stories into their designs, by utilizing traditional building methods, native materials, and themes inspired by regional art and craft (Devang Shan Architect, 2023). To give visitors an authentic experience, a hotel in Kyoto, for example, can include features from traditional Japanese tea houses, such as sliding doors, tatami mat flooring, and a tranquil garden. Hotels can further accentuate local culture by infusing indigenous materials into their design schemes. By sourcing materials locally, hotels not only contribute to the regional economy but also fill their spaces with a sense of authenticity and connection to the surrounding environment (Hospitality On, 2024).

Incorporating indigenous materials enhances the aesthetic appeal of the hotel and serves as a tangible representation of the local culture and heritage. By showcasing these materials prominently throughout the property, hotels can educate guests about their significance and promote sustainable practices and reduce the environmental footprint. Ultimately, by integrating indigenous materials into their design, hotels not only create visually striking spaces but also contribute to the preservation and sustainability of local culture, providing guests with an enriching experience.

#### *Utilizing local entertainment*

An engaging and vibrant approach for hotels to support their surrounding community is by engaging local bands, vocalists, entertainers, and artists for hotel events, highlighting the skill and enthusiasm of the community's talent. Thus the guests will not only enjoy the genuine performances, but the hotel can also become a hub and a platform for the artistic pursuits of local entertainers. By providing them with opportunities to showcase their talents, hotels contribute to the preservation of cultural traditions and inspire the younger generation in the community to uphold the area's heritage.

#### *Considering the historical significance*

Architects and designers can skillfully blend the demands of modern hospitality establishments with

the historical context of the city, particularly when operating within historically important districts. By repurposing ancient structures such as palaces or heritage buildings into luxurious hotels, architects retain their original charm, thereby infusing the hotel with distinct character and aiding in the preservation of the region's cultural heritage. Within this framework, some architects delve into history to imbue their designs with a unique identity. Integrating historical features in hospitality design can inspire feelings of nostalgia and forge connections with guests. Moreover, designers can employ vintage furnishings, architectural nuances, or other historical elements to craft a sense of belonging and narrate the space's story.

#### *Flexible and shared spaces*

Social interaction and communication are also important factors in embracing and promoting local culture. A key aspect of authenticity in hotel design is the integration of social spaces that foster genuine interactions and connections (Inspace R&D, 2023). Hotels can contribute to cultural connection by providing flexible shared spaces such as lobbies, lounges, dining areas, fitness centers, and outdoor spaces that are typically designed to be comfortable and inviting. They allow guests and locals the opportunity to interact, which can help to create a sense of community and connection. These spaces can be adapted or reconfigured to serve multiple purposes or accommodate different types of activities. They include multi-purpose rooms that can be used for events or meetings, as well as lounge areas that can be used for reading, working, or socializing. They help hotels create a more dynamic and engaging environment for guests. Because of their adaptability, flexible spaces provide even greater opportunities to incorporate local culture in unique, creative, authentic ways, appropriate to the intended purpose of the space.

#### *Outdoor spaces and gardens*

Gardens and outdoor spaces can also be inspired by the natural surroundings and local economic, social and cultural dynamic. Hotels in agricultural regions can include local farmers' products in their menus and decorate their gardens and outdoor areas with endemic plants and flowers. They can also offer farm-to-table dining experience, crop and fruit picking activities or classes in crop planting and harvesting in the hotels' on-site garden.

*Fusion between tradition and modernity*

In hotel design, the fusion of traditional and modern elements creates spaces that celebrate local culture but also appeal to the global market. While we have a duty to promote the continuity of indigenous local cultures, old traditions meet new creativity every day in cities around the world, contributing to the preservation of identity and diversity (Drexhage & Murphy, 2010). By blending old traditions with new creativity, hotels become dynamic centers for cultural innovation, where traditional art forms are revitalized through contemporary techniques and perspectives. Imagine each hotel as a thriving hub for the evolution of local culture, a place where tradition meets innovation. This approach could include artist residencies, workshops that blend traditional crafts with contemporary techniques, and local music festivals that present a fusion of heritage and modernity (Lunkad, 2023).

Moreover, traditions can be showcased in a futuristic manner, as exemplified by the Burj Al Arab in Dubai. Its architecture and interiors are inspired by the sail of a dhow, a traditional Arabian sailing vessel. This design choice not only represents Dubai's seafaring heritage but also communicates the city's aspirations for modernity and innovation. By striking a balance between tradition and modernity, hotels can create spaces that feel both local and universally appealing, meeting the expectations of modern travelers for comfort, luxury, and functionality. Mastering this delicate approach not only distinguishes hotels in terms of design but also shapes unforgettable guest experiences.

**Benefits of cultural integration in hotel design**

The global hotel industry commands an immense economic influence. In 2023, the global hospitality market reached over 4.7 trillion U.S. dollars and was forecast to grow to around 5.5 trillion U.S. dollars in 2024, as estimated by Statista (2023). It is projected that the revenue of the Hotels market will reach 446.5 billion U.S. dollars by the end of 2024 worldwide. Its financial capacity far surpasses that of organizations such as UNESCO. To put this in context, UNESCO's budget for the biennium spanning 2021-2022 amounted to approximately \$1.5 billion USD, and not all of the funds are spent on the preservation of cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2024). Even a modest redirection of merely 1% of the hospitality industry's annual revenue toward cultural innovation and integration would result in an infusion of over \$15 billion into the sector, nearly tenfold UNESCO's

entire annual budget (Lunkad, 2023). The emphasis on local experiences by hotels goes beyond providing guests with unique memories. It's an integrated approach that brings about economic growth, environmental preservation, and sustainable tourism, thereby benefiting both the guest and the community at large (Younadam, 2023).

Establishing a durable relationship between hotels and their local communities is of paramount importance. Notably, fostering such connections yields advantages for hotels that extend well beyond mere financial gains. Active involvement and backing of the local community confer mutual benefits upon the hotel, its guests and the community itself. Dedication to comprehending and valuing the historical, cultural, and social facets of the community is imperative. Such endeavors culminate in fostering loyalty, not solely from the community members, but also from guests who seek to revisit an authentic and distinctive hospitality experience.

Thoughtfully managed cultural heritage draws sustainable tourism investment by engaging local communities without causing harm to heritage sites. Cities endowed with a rich cultural heritage and a thriving creative scene inherently allure businesses. Advocating for inclusive and sustainable economic advancement through cultural and creative employment fosters the provision of dignified work. The creative sectors and cultural infrastructure represent significant assets for generating livelihoods. Here are some of the key benefits of cultural integration in hotel design:

*Economic boost for local products and services*

The development and utilization of locally-sourced products can be a significant catalyst for local businesses. By providing native goods and services such as agricultural products and handicrafts hotels encourage visitors to allocate more of their spending into the destination and prevent the so-called "tourism leakage". This approach can elevate incomes within the tourism sector, curb the reliance on imports and enhance the value proposition of local production. Moreover, when hotels partner with local artisans or craftsmen, be it for sourcing materials, culinary delights, or showcasing art, they can support their entrepreneurial efforts and create a sense of fulfillment. This support can be transformative for small businesses, allowing them to flourish and potentially expand.

*Preservation of crafts and arts*

The preservation of traditional crafts faces an existential threat amidst the tide of globalization. Hotels, recognizing their unique position at the intersection of tourism and local culture, can serve as guardians of these endangered crafts. Incorporating traditional craft and art elements into their décor not only adds an authentic charm to the ambiance but also elevates the cultural narrative for guests. Moreover, hosting workshops that offer immersive experiences in craft-making techniques engages guests and provides local artisans with a platform to showcase their skills and pass on their knowledge to future generations.

*Shortening of the supply chain and reducing the carbon footprint*

Sourcing locally helps hotels cut down on fuel consumption, air pollution, transportation and shipping costs. And as hotels are massive resource consumers, they can introduce local purchases all along the supply chain – food, bedding, decor and even entertainment (Hotelcamp Team, 2023). This creates beneficial partnerships for the future, resulting in more sustainable, long-term growth for the hotel business and for local suppliers. Local procurement ensures a smaller carbon footprint, making the hotel's operations more environmentally sustainable.

*Promotion of responsible tourism*

Engaging guests in sustainable practices, like consuming food from organic farms or buying eco-friendly local products and art pieces, creates a sense of responsibility. This can potentially influence their travel habits in the future, promoting responsible tourism. Moreover guests increasingly value authenticity and a connection to the local culture as part of their sustainability efforts. Offering locally inspired designs, products and cuisine enhances the overall guest experience.

*Community development and local pride*

When hotels prioritize showcasing local experiences, they frequently engage in community initiatives, ranging from heritage restoration endeavors and educational workshops to participation in local environmental conservation efforts. Such involvement not only enhances the quality of life for residents but also enriches the overall visitor experience. By strategically integrating artifacts and vintage items into their

design, hotels can evoke a sense of local pride among residents and actively promote local culture and traditions. Encouraging social interaction in hotels public spaces can also facilitate connections among guests and locals, fostering a sense of community and shared experiences.

*Enhancing loyalty and brand recognition*

Hotels that go the extra mile to customize local experiences based on a guest's interests witness a surge in loyalty (Younadam, 2023). A guest is more likely to return to a hotel that arranged a personalized local pottery class for them or recommended a hidden local gem, compared to a hotel that offered a standardized experience. By setting up interactions with local people and offering a firsthand look into local culture and lifestyle hotels can help guests feel part of the local fabric. Meaningful and customized experiences tend to be more memorable and satisfying. Also, showing the local community that the hotel management is invested in growing together by collaborating, highlighting, showcasing or sponsoring local vendors and artists regularly will bring the support of the community in return. Brand recognition amongst the locals can also be beneficial and promote word of mouth marketing (Hotelcamp Team, 2023).

**Examples for incorporating local culture in hotel design***Taj Hotels brand by IHCL, India*

Taj Hotels, a collection of upscale accommodations, operates as a subsidiary of the Indian Hotels Company Ltd., with its headquarters situated in Mumbai, India. Established by Jamsetji Tata in 1902, it stands as a vital component of the Tata Group conglomerate. The chain has embraced a commitment to provide authentic Indian hospitality, called Tajness. “Preserving India’s heritage is not just our policy, it is a part of our very being”, is written on the official website of the brand (Taj Hotels, 2024). The entire experience revolves around a landscape, the local knowledge and folklore. The hotel chain weaves those characteristics to make guests’ stay unique and foster a sense of belonging. From little hamlets and weaving communities in Benaras and Pochampally, the chain’s exquisite saris arrive to greet clients across all hotels with their beautiful patterns, Ikat style of dyeing and regal colors. This provides guests with a glimpse of India’s art and heritage as saris are draped around the very fabric of India.

Volunteering is also woven into the Taj culture and more than 7,000 of the brand associates make time each year for mentoring, guiding and shaping neighborhoods, cultures and communities through a host of events and initiatives. The Tata Volunteering Week is an example of this approach.

Taj Lake Palace, a hotel in Udaipur at Lake Pichola, keeps the spirit of the original building, constructed between 1743-1746 by Maharana Jagat Singh II (Taj Hotels, 2024b). It was used as a summer retreat by the Mewar Royal family until Maharana Bhagwat Singh, Mewar of Udaipur in 1963 converted it into a heritage hotel. Taj Lake Palace is a building made of marble locally sourced from Rajnagar. Architecture is influenced by Mughals and predominantly led by Mewari techniques. Restored to its pristine glory, this palace became world renowned when the James Bond film 'Octopussy' was filmed at it. Guests can experience the distinct culinary offerings through signature specialty restaurants, serving authentic Rajasthani and other dishes from India as well as contemporary European delicacies. The 5 star hotel preserves and continues the tradition of grand soirees and formal levees which were hosted here by the royal family of Udaipur.

#### ***Bursa Hotel in Kiev, Ukraine***

The hotel embraces a minimalist design aesthetic, adhering to a Bauhaus style and a "less is more" mindset that runs throughout (Design Hotels, 2024). Simple shapes and forms that are playfully offset by color, texture, and light can be found in the hotel. Inspirations from the masters of avant-garde architecture and materials produced in Ukraine are counterbalanced by handmade tiles from Portugal in the hotel bar. Bursa is a mix of two new structures and two 19th-century buildings that mirror the charm and bohemian spirit of Podil. The historic section of the hotel once served as the residence of architect Andriy Melenskyi, a key figure in shaping the aesthetic of the Podil district during the early 1800s. Reflecting this heritage, Bursa Hotel seamlessly integrates the past with the present, harmonizing historical architectural elements with contemporary design. Through the strategic use of concrete, wood, glass, and brick, the hotel achieves a cohesive blend of materials, presenting sleek and functional forms that prioritize both aesthetics and utility. Bursa established its own art gallery, a versatile venue dedicated to fostering artistic and cultural endeavors within

Ukraine. Serving as a platform for emerging artists from Ukraine and neighboring post-Soviet nations, Bursa Gallery embodies the hotel's commitment to nurturing art, culture and creativity. With a mission centered on championing artists and projects that explore traditional techniques, the gallery fulfills its objective of serving as a hub for the burgeoning generation of Ukrainian artists and their supporters.

#### ***Andaz Bali, Indonesia***

Opened in April 2021, the resort's overarching concept mirrors its surroundings and draws inspiration from the neighboring villages (Sands, 2021). Embracing an intimate scale, the resort features buildings nestled amidst lush greenery and employs the use of distinctive red brick, a traditional construction material in Sanur. At the heart of the resort lies the Village Square, characterized by its open, barrier-free design that encourages interaction among guests and local residents. Arranged in low-rise clusters across a lush tropical landscape, the guest accommodations and facilities are strategically positioned following the cardinal directions, which hold cultural significance in the Balinese Hindu religion. Reflecting a contemporary Balinese style, the rooms, suites, and villas incorporate locally sourced materials such as bamboo, andesite stone, marble, and teakwood.

#### ***Gallery 37 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria***

Gallery 37 Art Hotel is part of the Archipelago International chain, falling under their elite sub-brand – ASTON (Gallery 37, 2024). The hotel is located in the heart of the biggest landmark in Plovdiv – Architectural and Historical Reserve "Ancient Plovdiv", also known as the Old Town, where history and art fill every single street. Gallery 37 is positioned by the adjacent "Klianti" museum built in the middle of the 18th century and known for its impressive murals and multi-colored ceilings, which also make it one of the city's most visited sights. The design and decoration of the hotel is inspired by Plovdiv's rich history, art and cultural heritage, as shared by the general manager Petar Denchev in a conversation with the author of this report. Gallery 37 is located in a neoclassical house, restored in 2019, with 11 cozy rooms, each with its own identity. In each of the rooms, an original masterpiece by the most famous Bulgarian artists is exhibited. Designer-made art rooms in the spirit of the Old Town, presented through the prism of modernity, impress with history and coziness. As

soon as the guests enter the hotel, they see original paintings that adorn the lobby, dining room and staircase. The feeling of a gallery is enhanced by the fact that, in addition to the presence of 37 canvases in the house, hotel guests can purchase a painting from a specially selected catalog. Rumen Zhekov – one of the most famous Plovdiv painters, leaves his signature in the construction of the hotel. He takes an active part in choosing the color scheme of the interior, thus testifying to the authenticity, immersing it through the spirit of modernity.

The challenges to the realization of both the concept and the project are many. The house was in a deplorable state, which led to its complete demolition, preserving only the facades. In place of the existing three floors, four new floors were built, preserving the existing dimensions of the windows on the facades and the height of the building. The floor space is not large, but with resourceful solutions, the hotel has three rooms per floor, a reception and a breakfast room. On the top floor, additional romance is created by the small terraces with an amazing view of the Old Town and Plovdiv.

The hotel's eleven rooms have a unique and different design, inspired by the traditional Bulgarian houses from the Renaissance and the subsequent Neoclassical period. The main highlight of the rooms are the lighting fixtures specially produced for the hotel – panels made on the basis of original motifs from the old wooden ceilings, illuminated with LED lights. The wallpapers in the rooms are also custom-made and locally-sourced with various classic motifs from Bulgarian history – embroideries (shevitsi), seals with lions, medallions, moldings and orders. In the restoration process and the interior decoration the main task of the designers is to create a hotel with unique and memorable character, celebrating Plovdiv's historical and cultural heritage and showcasing the talent of Bulgarian artists.

#### ***Hyatt Regency Pravets Resort, Bulgaria***

The opening of the Hyatt Regency Pravets Resort in July 2023 marks a significant milestone, as the hotel, following an impressive renovation, now proudly joins the esteemed Hyatt chain. The hotel integrates Bulgarian art, folklore, and culinary traditions into its design and guest experience. This integration seamlessly blends luxurious accommodation with artistic elements, inviting visitors to immerse themselves in both comfort and culture, as stated by Martina Dimitrova, Marketing Assistant of Hyatt Regency Pravets Resort, in a

conversation with the author of this publication. The resort's ambiance is enriched by the presence of iconic sculptures by Vezhdi Rashidov, such as "The Road," which embodies the human pursuit of perfection. Rashidov's bronze and granite masterpiece welcomes guests in front of the main entrance and serves as a symbolic gateway to the resort. A cornerstone of Bulgarian folklore, the "shevitsa" (embroidered textile patterns) finds a modern interpretation in the carpets adorning the entrance hall and lobby bar. This subtle yet impactful design element connects guests to the country's cultural heritage, offering a visually captivating experience. Moreover, the resort's strategic location not only offers guests an idyllic setting overlooking Pravets Lake but also provides opportunities to immerse in Bulgarian traditions amidst an atmosphere of timeless elegance (World of Hyatt, 2024).

Dining experiences at the Hyatt Regency Pravets Resort further celebrate Bulgaria's rich cultural and culinary heritage. Guests are treated to exceptional culinary delights inspired by local cuisine (The Collection Magazine, 2023). The Lion & Rose restaurant stands as a testament to this commitment, offering a stage where chefs showcase their artistry amidst Bulgaria's cultural tapestry. The prestigious event Pravets Art Nights, hosted by the resort, replaces the former MozArt Festival. This revamped event features world-renowned musicians and the Sofia Philharmonic, further solidifying the resort's commitment to showcasing Bulgarian artistic excellence. By seamlessly integrating art, folklore motifs, and culinary experiences, Hyatt Regency Pravets Resort offers guests a luxurious escape steeped in Bulgarian culture.

#### **Recommendations and considerations in incorporating local culture and sustainability in hotel design**

In the hospitality industry, the incorporation of cultural and local identity into hotel design has garnered increasing attention as a means to enhance guest experiences and differentiate brands. Although there are many good examples, this endeavor is not without its challenges, particularly concerning issues of authenticity, appropriation, and sensitivity to local customs. This section of the report aims to explore strategies for hotels to effectively integrate and celebrate local culture in their design while following the principles of sustainability.

*Cultural sensitivity and authenticity*

Integrating cultural influences into hotel design necessitates a delicate balance between authenticity and sensitivity. Designers must approach this task with respect for local customs and traditions, ensuring that cultural elements enhance rather than dilute the guest experience. Collaboration with local communities and cultural experts is paramount to ensuring designs are appropriate and authentic.

*Training staff to be local ambassadors*

Hotel staff play a crucial role in facilitating authentic guest experiences by acting as local ambassadors. Investing in personnel training programs ensures that employees are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about local attractions, traditions, and cultural nuances. Continuous training sessions can familiarize staff with the intricacies of local culture, enabling them to provide valuable insights to guests and enhance overall satisfaction. The training on sustainable development and responsible tourism through cultural preservation will enable the personnel to provide quality service that corresponds to the needs of the contemporary travelers.

*Limitations and mitigation strategies*

Despite the benefits, hotels face several limitations in integrating local culture into their design, including cultural comprehension, brand rigidity, and short-term profitability focus. Mitigation strategies include fostering cultural partnerships, implementing flexible brand guidelines, and emphasizing the long-term value of cultural and sustainable investments. Additionally, promoting innovation and narrative marketing can help overcome corporate hesitancy towards cultural integration.

*Utilizing local goods and services*

Beyond design elements, hotels can support local businesses and enhance authenticity by sourcing goods and services locally. From handcrafted toiletries to locally-made bed linens, integrating regionally-produced items into hotel amenities can provide guests with a genuine sense of place. Furthermore, purchasing local products not only supports the local economy but also promotes sustainable and responsible tourism practices.

*Focusing on the room design*

While the public spaces of hotels, including the lobby, lounges, restaurants and spas, undoubtedly

contribute to the overall guest experience, it is the quality, comfort and decoration of their living accommodations that truly shape their satisfaction. Therefore, hotels should prioritize not only the design and upkeep of public areas but also the meticulous attention to detail in the design of guest rooms to ensure a truly exceptional and memorable experience.

*Including locally-inspired design into the communication strategy*

Incorporating locally-inspired design into the marketing and communication strategy can further reinforce the hotel's commitment to cultural integration and sustainability. It can be achieved by using local cultural motifs, patterns, and colors in the hotel's branding and website design, and promotional materials to convey a sense of place and cultural authenticity. Promoting cultural events, festivals, and themed experiences hosted by the hotel through targeted marketing campaigns and social media outreach can support the communication efforts of the brand. Hotels could also offer educational materials, such as brochures, maps, or audio guides, that provide insights into the cultural significance of the hotel's design elements and surrounding landmarks. Educating visitors about cultural heritage conservation and responsible tourism can encourage respect for local customs, traditions, and the natural environment.

By following the recommendations outlined above, hotels can achieve a similar level of cultural authenticity throughout the guest journey, from the public areas to the most private spaces. Navigating potential challenges with sensitivity and creativity can help hotels create unique services that authentically reflect the spirit of their destination. Embracing cultural diversity not only enriches the guest experience but also contributes to the sustainable development of tourism destinations.

**Conclusion**

The evolving landscape of the hospitality industry is characterized by a shift towards personalized, culturally immersive experiences that embrace sustainability. Modern travelers seek more than just a place to stay. They desire immersive experiences that deeply connect them with the culture, history, and spirit of their chosen destinations. This shift has given rise to a new era of hotel design – one that seamlessly integrates technology, sustainability, and local culture to

create memorable and authentic guest experiences. By incorporating elements of local culture into their design and services, hotels offer guests unique and memorable stays, fostering a deeper connection to the destination. From the artwork adorning the walls to the music playing in the lobby and the cuisine served in the dining area, every aspect of the guest journey is carefully curated to reflect the essence of the host region.

This emphasis on cultural integration goes beyond mere aesthetics – it is a commitment to preserving and promoting the rich tapestry of local heritage. By embracing the principles of cultural stewardship laid out by UNESCO, hotels become not just places to stay but custodians of cultural identity. They recognize the value of cultural heritage as a finite and irreplaceable resource that must be carefully managed and protected for future generations. This recognition extends to the moral responsibility of every generation to act as trustees of cultural heritage, collaborating with local communities to ensure its survival and vitality.

The symbiotic relationship between cultural integration and sustainability is also evident in modern hotel design. By incorporating indigenous materials, promoting local artisans, and offering authentic cultural experiences, hotels not only enrich the guest experience but also contribute to the economic viability of local communities. This approach helps to distribute tourism revenue more equitably, mitigating the negative impacts of overtourism and ensuring the long-term sustainability of both the destination and the hospitality industry as a whole.

To enhance their sustainability efforts through cultural integration, hotels must prioritize community engagement, environmental stewardship, and responsible tourism practices. This means forging partnerships with local stakeholders, implementing eco-friendly initiatives, and educating guests about the importance of cultural and environmental preservation. By doing so, hotels can forge a path towards sustainability while authentically celebrating the rich diversity of cultures worldwide.

In conclusion, the potential for the hospitality industry to become a leading patron of culture is immense. Thus hotels can set themselves apart and deliver unparalleled guest experiences while championing the communities they serve. This approach not only aligns with the global aspirations of the new generation but also sets a benchmark for

other sectors to follow. As the emphasis on local experiences continues to intensify, hotels that prioritize cultural connection will emerge as frontrunners in the hospitality industry, redefining what it means to be a truly immersive and authentic destination.

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