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Hyper-Localization: Bringing the Outside in When Building and Designing Hotels

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Mr. Lee

A Hyper-localized design demonstrates an intentioned approach to go above and beyond, weaving every possible detail into the destination itself. It's about taking things like the flora and fauna; climatic cues; the unique topographical nature of the site; one-of-a-kind experiences only found in a specific location and creating a vernacular that is familiar but also surprising and intriguing.

The idea of hyper-localized design pulls inspiration from various characteristics, including: history and culture, traditions and festivals, national landscape and topography, people and local businesses, memories and myths, and seasonal flora and fauna. Creating a vision for a new property involves a deep dive into each of the areas that are special to a location, searching for the intricacies that will inform a design that speaks to the guest and allows them to take part in an unparalleled experience.

Gone are the days of the predictable hospitality model from both the perspective of the built environment, the program and operations. The rise of boutique hotel brands and independent operators has transformed the luxury hospitality landscape to represent the exclusivity of each destination while harnessing a sense of inclusivity of the community. There are many aspects of a location that influence and spark a creative drive in designers. Boutique hotels, for instance, have always aspired to be a reflection of the place and worked against what made some of the big brand hotels so successful for so long. They've captured a genre of traveler that has now grown and flourished, setting a new expectation for tailored design that's now paved the way for larger hospitality icons to evolve and reposition themselves.

Growing up in the Bay Area, I've watched the area go through a transformation, at times a very rapid transformation due to the growth of the tech industry and entrepreneurial spirit. Driving down the Peninsula and going through areas like Mountain View and Palo Alto, I'm reminded of the areas' agrarian past; fruit trees as far as you can see and sprawling farms. Today, we're met with a myriad of tech campuses, some devoid of any real connection to the rich history of the land they occupy.

When we were asked to design the 1 Hotel in Sunnyvale, we knew we wanted to connect the design to the innovative tech community that had been a catalyst for growth in the area, but also to the agrarian roots that had visually started disappearing. Bringing native elements into the project, like fruit trees and vegetable gardens that grace the property, we gave a nod to orchards and farming practices of the past. The hotel is a respite of the surrounding tech campuses and mixed-use developments, celebrating the ruralness that once was and the strong connection to the outdoors.



The one thing that all our projects have in common as an influence is the setting. Whether the architectural context exists or not, the setting is always the strongest influence when we begin to develop the design of a new luxury hospitality destination. Working on destinations around the globe, we are frequently faced with the challenge of unearthing an architectural vernacular based on a completely blank slate.

In places like the Middle East, where entire cities are being developed in the vast untouched land, how do you draw on the destinations people, culture and history to develop a hyper-localized design when in fact the area is devoid of these things? Designers can look to the neighboring areas, sometimes hundreds of miles away, however, this may lead to a lack of design diversification and would ultimately be a cookie cutter approach. Instead, we look to mother nature, who has dominated the earth in terms of natural shelter for thousands of years. Searching the intricate coral patterns, the dynamic movement of the windswept sand and the subtle erosion of the mountains for natural influence vs those man-made. We look at the greater regional features to tie back to a wider expanse of place, but we develop an architectural vernacular that celebrates the absence of man.

Hyper-localization is a movement that has influenced a more holistic and healthy lifestyle across various market segments, not just hospitality. When we think of the trends and evolution of food and beverage, it wasn't long ago that we as consumers had no idea where our food was coming from or how it had been raised. With chefs like Alice Waters and Jeremiah Tower paving the way, we celebrate not just the culinary excellence of such talented individuals, but also the knowledge of where our food comes from and the ways in which our food is grown or raised. In most cases, ingredients are found in close proximity to the dining experience, if not grown directly by the chef and their team. It is becoming the norm for menus to be seasonally specific, evolving throughout the year to incorporate fresh local products. This creates a destination that is ever changing, where your experience and memories are made new each time for the guest.

Hospitality focused mixed-use developments are taking on a similar mindset, recruiting tenets that have a tie to the community and will infuse a local flair into the destination. This engages the locals and visitors, creating a bond between those that call the area home and those that seek it out as a one-of-a-kind experience.

Sought after Pinot Noir producer, Kosta Browne, and Yerba Mate creator, Guayaki, both call The Barlow in Sebastopol, California home. The development is headquarters to a number of local businesses and has become a place of gathering for immediate locals as well as those from throughout the Bay Area. The Barlow has created a destination where people can come together and enjoy the best of the best in the surrounding area. Its ability to keep people engaged and returning has made it one of the most successful and growing mixed-use developments in the region.

The same can be said in a resort setting, with a classic example being Calistoga Ranch in Northern California. The

resort architecture itself is a quiet statement, allowing the natural surroundings and high-profile winemakers of the area to take center stage. Tucked into a private canyon in the Upper Napa Valley, the resort rests on a 157-acre site marked by ancient oaks, majestic hills, a rock-hewn stream, and a private lake.

The humble free-standing guest lodges are embraced by expansive cedar decks and offer an unparalleled indoor/outdoor experience through floor-to-ceiling windows. Calistoga Ranch holds a strong connection to the local vintners in the area, bringing them in and creating opportunities for them to showcase their wine in a way that's exclusive to the property and its guests and residents. This relationship creates a bond between the property and the local community.



In remote destinations, the inclusion of the local community can at times be difficult to connect or display. Looking for innovative ways to bring to life an experience that truly immerses the traveler in the destination before they even arrive can set the tone for the guest journey. In the case of a luxury boutique development in the Caribbean which we have the pleasure to be working on, the team has introduced an arrival village as the procession to the resort property. This village will be home to locals of the area as well as the resort ambassadors. It is a place where produce is grown, where recycling is done, where energy is produced - it is an entry statement that celebrates the people of the community and their unending hospitality. Guests can walk back to the village throughout their stay and explore daily village life, meandering, discovering and experiencing the place.

A complete experience - that's what people are looking for. It's a chance to roll up their sleeves and be a part of something, to embark on a journey and be introduced to things they would never have known or done. The rise of the maker movement has continued to ignite this passion in people, shaping the amenities and offerings of new hospitality destinations. For example, 5-10 years ago people would go to a winery and participate in a simple wine tour, seeing the barrels and vats and being shown how the wine was made.

Today, people want to be a part of the process, they want to get their hands in and make the wine themselves. Imagine harvesting the grapes and being part of the production process then years later a bottle of the wine that you helped create shows up on your door with a note from the winemaker. That is a memory that not only lasts but one that connects them with the destination for years to come.

We, as designers, have the opportunity and responsibility to foster the out-of-the-box thinking that can lead to planning, programming and an architectural vernacular that lends itself to amazing experiences for people the world over. The design of a new hospitality development should immediately connect the guest with the place, creating a destination that speaks to the individuality of the site.

As design becomes more synonymous with experience, we will see an influx of eccentric offerings which are particular to the local. As humans, there's a satisfaction in being a part of a larger whole; in forging something

yourself. It's our innate nature to want to participate in the creation of those ideas or objects which are truly unique, taking pride in what has come to be. Hyper-localized design is a growing movement, altering the criteria for most when it comes to selecting a hotel or resort; a restaurant; a spa; or even a second home.

Today's traveler wants to immerse themselves in the place and leave there knowing more about the place than what they came with. In essence, they want to feel like they're part of the destination, not just an outsider.

With over 20 years of design experience, Scott Lee provides the firm with senior leadership and design talent, specializing in hotel, resort, recreational and mixed-use projects. As president and principal, he plays a leading role in determining the firm's long-term mission, direction and goals. Mr. Lee's active role in business development and marketing has been a driving force in the company's successes and its emergence as a force in the hospitality industry. Mr. Lee brings a singular passion to SB Architects. His favorite phrase is, "it's all architecture, all the time," which comes as no surprise to anyone who knows him. "Passionate" and "driven" are the two words most often used to describe him, and architecture is woven into every aspect of his life. Although he always loved to draw and build, it wasn't until the ripe age of 10 that Mr. Lee settled on architecture as a profession. Mr. Lee can be contacted at 415-673-8990 or contactsf@sb-architects.com

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