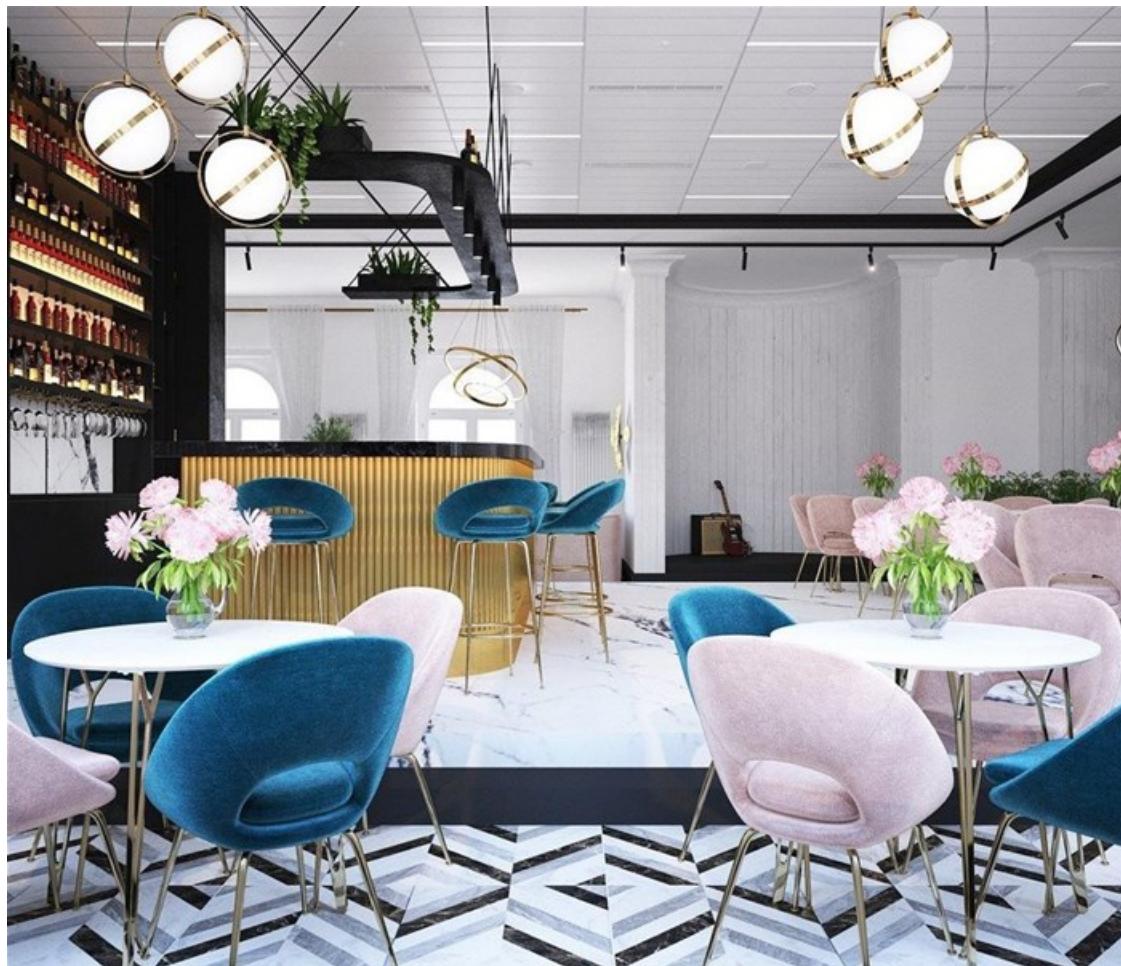


What does the future of hotel design look like?

By Guy Stehlík

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The Covid-19 pandemic has no doubt had a crippling effect on travel, and going back to a functioning industry in the future is bound to be interesting, to say the least.



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Guy Stehlík, CEO and founder of BON Hotels chats to the hotel's interior design building and procurement partner, Grant Gillis - who designs, builds and fits out hotels throughout Africa - to get his opinion on what checking into a hotel may look like in the near future, and how the hotel industry can be expected to change, specifically from a design point of view.

In what way do you think space will be used in hotel design post-pandemic?

The million-dollar question is if all existing hotels and restaurants under the new guidance and restrictions will actually reopen. As an interior design and space planning hospitality specialist the only fundamental issue I have is a return on investment. It may mean that smaller hotels don't find it viable to reopen if having to halve the guest accommodation becomes a reality.

Having already looked at different designs, implementing non-touch welcomes/computer check-ins are expensive if they have to be added to an existing hotel. In addition, it's a reality that most people crave recognition and they crave the conversation that normally goes with the checking in at a hotel, and a purely technological check-in system won't satisfy that need.

In order for a guest to check-in, they need to have their perception satisfied that the hotel is doing everything in its power to look after them, specifically the cleanliness related to the Covid pandemic. I believe the most effective way is to place one guest relations staff member at the entrance, with the purpose of warmly welcoming guests.

This human interaction may ease guests' anxiety, especially in the beginning stages of hotels reopening and after they have been screened on arrival.

Similar changes can be expected for bedrooms and bathrooms. In a perfect world, the new en-suite bathroom will have an electronic door that requires no touch and closes behind you. The bathroom itself should be fully tiled, with sealed light fittings to eliminate touch. Central drains are something that should be implemented to allow for ease of sanitisation, in addition to sealed toilet paper and reusable guest amenities being discarded after opening.

In which ways will technology be further incorporated into hotels?

Besides the possible use of cellphones as an option to swipe key cards, touch-screen technology will more than likely be phased out in the name of hygiene. I believe that it will take a back seat to fibre optic high quality Wi-Fi, needed to endure the seamless transition of reading QR codes for guests.

How do you envisage the traditional buffets changing in future?

In addition to the decontamination process when guests arrive at the hotel, a similar process will need to be followed at the restaurant and/or bar areas. I think the traditional buffet will have to change and certain items will have to be ordered and plated.

Alternatively, there will have to be a few more people behind the counter dishing up directly on to patrons' plates.

Cutlery and crockery should effectively be encased in plastic wrapping to alleviate the issue of other patrons or staff directly touching the utensils. Cold buffet dishes will need to be pre-plated, wrapped and dished from behind glass sneeze guards. Sanitising wipes will have to be put on all tables to deal with the coverings and disposal of used cutlery and crockery, while waiters will need to be wearing gloves.

How do you think hotels could prioritise safety at check-in counters while keeping the area relaxing and welcoming?

In the future, hotels and guests can look forward to a thorough screening process, including a walkthrough disinfection process and having their temperatures taken. Once the disinfection process is complete, a significantly different reception area is to be expected.

It is relatively easy to split reception counters in new hotels, or isolate existing reception counters with translucent screens. There could even be a situation where you check in guests with an IPad/tablet at a lounge-type setting where social

distancing is easily achievable.

It will also be crucial to ensure that queues don't form often. A few ways to avoid this from happening include implementing digital queuing software, designing the reception space to accommodate queues and informing guests of any expected queue times.

Perhaps most importantly, the space between guests should be monitored. There should always be hotel staff available to closely track any potential violation of social distancing to avoid complaints or disagreements between the hotel and guests, or between guests.

If you could redesign the traditional hotel bar to accommodate social distancing, how would you envision it?

I believe that this area will in fact change to more of a service bar, with seating options suited to individual guests. For groups of people visiting the bar, the traditional S-shaped seat can accommodate social distancing when elongated, allowing for an ideal two-metre social distance.

People like to be among others when they are travelling alone and dine/drink activities are the perfect opportunities for them to feel part of a group. The hotel public areas will still need to remain populated, albeit having new social distancing policies in place.

In the way we design a space, it is essential that the first person feels totally comfortable. I believe restaurant and bar areas may become multifunctional, to allow for cleaning crews to be more visible from any seat in the hotel.

In what way do you think hotels will adapt the layout of the conference facilities?

Fixed tables and seating at levels as stipulated by the government will need to be implemented. I think this element of hotels may suffer as the boom of video conferencing has proven that many meetings can be conducted remotely. In my opinion, rooms will get smaller and become more adaptable to account for remote meetings.

For larger group meetings, separate teams can be set up in different cities and dial into video conferencing from the conference rooms, essentially cutting down on travel, time and accommodation expenses.

ABOUT GUY STEHLIK

Guy Stehlik is the CEO and founder of BON Hotels and Director of BON Hotels International West Africa. Having vast experience in all aspects of Hotel Management as well as having owned his own hotels, Guy created BON Hotels as an "owner-staff-community-guest" centric company to herald in and define an exciting new era in hotel management.

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