

ChetanTrends: Hotel Hub

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-By Denise Corso

Gone are the days of passing through impersonal hotel lobbies to check in or out. Now the lobby is an epicenter for everything that takes place in a hotel. Guests can relax, play, work, eat, and drink. And it's crucial for designers to accommodate this spectrum of activities, while also creating a visually appealing space and anchoring the hotel in its setting by bringing the outdoors in.

Today, not only is the lobby a place to conduct business, but it is also a place to socialize and relax. The hotel guest expects the lobby to be well designed, thought provoking, flexible, technology friendly, and comfortable. It's about multiple experiences that both heighten the senses and create a feeling of calm, depending on the guests' needs at any particular moment. As such, the lobby has become the living room, meeting room, dining room, and chill-out space all in one.

When CorsoStaicoff completed the renovation of the Hotel Murano in Tacoma, Wash., in 2008, we integrated multipurpose spaces in the lobby by designing a variety of seating areas defined by raised platforms, fireplaces, columns, dramatic art installations, and varying ceiling heights. A bar on a raised platform overlooking the lobby offers both a place to perch and people-watch or grab a drink over a quiet conversation. Adjacent to the lobby bar, an informal seating group, centered on a fireplace adorned with a custom, glass sculpture by Brent Lee Young, provides a spot for both work and play. In the center of the lobby in a tall atrium space under a large custom chandelier designed by Massimo Micheluzzi is a grouping of informal yet comfortable furnishings amidst the hustle and bustle. This space is often used for short-term seating, informal meetings, or simply a hangout for those who want to see and be seen. CorsoStaicoff achieves a successful multifunctional space within Hotel Murano's lobby by providing an open dining experience, both private and semi-private seating arrangements, proper technology such as Wi-fi access, and signature art pieces creating a unique yet approachable environment.

Utilizing hotel lobbies as venues to display art not only creates a unique design that enhances the guest experience, but also it engages the community through the commissioning of local artists. The Hotel Max in Seattle, which opened in late 2005, was the first property in which CorsoStaicoff experimented with commissioning local artists to provide original large-scale conversation pieces for both the public spaces and guest rooms. A life-sized triptych by Jay Backstrand installed in the lobby is visible from the street and succinctly introduces the art theme of the hotel.

CorsoStaicoff coined a movement called "Maximalism" and published a book that included a biography on the artists exhibited in the hotel. Each Hotel Max guestroom is equipped with a book, and the hotel Web site also includes the artists' work as do the room keys, business cards, and hotel ad campaigns. The story starts in the lobby but is far reaching.

The success of the art program Hotel Max led to the Hotel Murano, where the design team looked to the flourishing local Tacoma art community for influence. Glass pioneer and Tacoma native Dale Chihuly and the Tacoma Glass Museum have both been major factors in setting Tacoma apart from other cities. The design team linked the hotel to the community using glass art as its vehicle. It was critical that the lobby backdrop be minimal and neutral to allow the art to be the focus. Exposed concrete structure, expansive architectural glass, and high ceilings provide an international setting perfect for dramatic large-scale art.

The lobby collection at Hotel Murano includes both well-established and up-and-coming artists from the Northwest and around the world. The beauty and luster of art glass is integrated into everything from the front desk to the entry door pulls, designed in collaboration with glass artist Orefeo Quagliata. The art story is the hero, and the finish selections support this. At no point is the story diluted— it evolves. It hits you as you enter the lobby encouraging you to explore your surroundings and quietly follows you to your room.

Not only does including local art help tie the hotel to its setting, but creating an open-air outdoor lobby actually makes the hotel part of the neighborhood. Outdoor spaces are being utilized for far more than the swimming pool these days with outdoor lobbies, event venues, and rooftop gardens becoming more of the norm. When CorsoStaicoff was commissioned to renovate the Hotel Modera in Portland, Ore., in 2007, the interior design team worked with architects and landscape architects to reconfigure the building and its entry sequencing. The porte cochiere was relocated, the lobby was extended, and a central courtyard was added, replacing the former parking lot. The lobby floor-to-ceiling glass connects the courtyard and integrates the indoors with the outdoors.

The hotel restaurant, bar, meeting spaces, and lobby all spill into the outdoor space creating a dynamic atmosphere. A collection of seating groups flanking fire pits offer diverse options for dining, quiet time, or an informal outdoor meeting on a summer evening. A large living “green wall” runs the length of the courtyard creating a lush environment doubling as a large evolving art installation visible from the public spaces and guestrooms. The courtyard is an urban retreat for not only the hotel guest but also the passerby, as well.

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