

# The Evolution of Space

by Chris McBeath

If cleaning is the biggest priority in the hospitality industry right now, the next biggest is redesigning hotel spaces with enough flexibility to accommodate every coronavirus-related rule of cleanliness and social distancing—all while keeping guest comfort and safety intact.

In many cases, the global pandemic has accelerated industry transitions already underway, such as mainstreaming fully integrated technology, retrofitting building infrastructure, and repurposing space for greater flexibility.

Ushering guests through the hotel lobby and to their rooms has become a no-touch art unto itself—and negotiating communal spaces like health clubs, salons, and swimming pools is an entirely different animal. Designers and architects are already reimagining hotel amenities, along with lobbies, meeting areas and back-of-house operations, through the lens of physical distancing and hygiene requirements. Where it took more than a decade for green technology to gain serious traction in design and construction, COVID-inspired clean promises a far speedier integration.

### Reconfiguring Space

“Social distancing goes against the psychology of a hospitality experience,” says Dr. Stephani Robson, a former Vancouverite who is currently a senior lecturer in hotel and restaurant design at Cornell University’s School of Hotel Administration. “How do you do this safely without giving off a vibe that feels more like a medical facility? It’s a real challenge.”

Dr. Robson suggests starting with smaller seating groups in lobbies to offset crowding around the front desk; facilitating health checks; and offering no-touch registration processes. Where space is tight, digital queuing software might be considered, much like a restaurant’s waitlist management and paging system.



It’s about creating nooks and crannies to feel more secure.

“People feel comfortable when they can defend their personal space,” continues Dr. Robson. “Check-in could move into restyled conference areas where, instead of plexiglass barriers, there could be seating clusters divided by bookshelves, plants, and easy-to-move cube furniture that also maintains proper sight lines for an inviting atmosphere.

It’s not just placing seats far apart, it’s about creating nooks and crannies to feel more secure—booths with high backs and five-foot partitions.” The same can be accomplished in hotel restaurants and bars.

Before COVID-19, multi-use flex spaces were already on-trend, and these scenarios can be easily translated to restaurant dining



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where social distancing capacities are drastically impacting revenues. Today, guests might expect to eat in many different hotel spaces, such as themed conference rooms, pool patios or garden areas—anywhere that creates a memorable experience. Such dining options lend themselves to pitchers and large platters, where guests seated together can serve themselves family-style. One example is the JW Marriott Parq Vancouver, where the sprawling elevated outdoor patio has opened to dining and small group gatherings.

The Inn at Laurel Point in Victoria is also using its outdoor space in unexpected ways, revealing a new look just weeks before COVID-19 forced its closure. “It wasn’t great timing,” says Brooke Harris, Director of Sales. “Now we’ve reopened again, we’re seeing how our renovated space is flexing to host smaller groups in a very coronavirus-aware setting. For example, our new garden area has already seen a donor lunch set up in scenic ‘pods’, each with its own picnic basket. Our outside space is integral to the hotel and, with its proximity to the ballroom, we’re able to provide many flexible COVID-safe set-ups.”

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### Hybrid Guestrooms

Repurposing guestrooms into private offices emerged as a global trend prior to COVID-19, and promises to gain momentum in coming months as teleworkers seek out clean, quiet spaces to set up shop. Fairmont Pacific Rim in Vancouver is one property offering this option, alongside complimentary parking.

Customized wellness was another pre-COVID trend, and now promises to hit its stride. Hilton’s two-in-one hotel-gym guestrooms and Westin’s WORKOUT guestrooms (complete with Peloton bikes) are right on target to cater to the evolving wellness psyche. Demand will likely grow exponentially, so perhaps now is the time to relocate your hotel’s gym equipment to private rooms. At the very least, start offering mats and dumbbells as part of room service offerings, along with virtual instruction videos.

“Retrofitting rooms can be tricky,” cautions Dr. Robson. “Equipment needs a certain amount of square footage and may transfer noise and vibration. For older properties in particular, it might be a question of making sure some rooms simply have space devoid of furnishings to allow guests an area for yoga or Pilates floor exercises.”

### The Techno Boom

Without a doubt, COVID-19 has set augmented technology on a wildly faster track. Its ability to create a seamless, integrated, empowered, and touchless guest experience will elevate technology to the new gold standard, both back- and front-of-house.

Technology-based sanitization will impact how space is developed and used. Touch-screen technology will likely phase out in the name of hygiene, making way for mobile and virtual check-in; at the same time, voice recognition will move to the forefront in controlling digital room systems.

Teleworking and crowd-caution means that, for the next year or so—and perhaps beyond—meeting spaces will need to be smaller and bubble-oriented, and packed with accessible, fast and ready-to-use technology. Right on target are Crowne Plaza’s new concepts like The Pod and The Nook, which offer independent work space for soloists or

small groups alongside tablets for on-demand F&B service; the hotel also hosts a 24/7 grab ‘n go snack shop with self-pay technology enabled by a swipe of a room key or credit card.

But COVID-19 has upped the technological ante even further. Think Zoom rooms with green screens, Webex Meeting Center platforms, TeamViewer gatherings, webcams, and high-quality broadcasting equipment setting the stage for everything from product launches to avatar-style conventions.

That said, Dr. Robson believes there will always be a need for personal connection that open chat lines can’t satiate. “Working from home is full of distractions, and for the concept to keep its productivity team members need to feel that team energy. They need to reconnect for watercooler conversations, talk over a desktop from an appropriate distance, and have one-on-one interaction beyond screen time.”

She emphasizes that room mix is key, suggesting that some rooms can be set up as workspace with beds removed to capture remote workers, a submarket made all the more viable with platforms such as HotelsbyDay.com, Recharge, and Dayuse.com. “If a hotel can provide stable, blazingly fast WiFi, room service, and a quiet productive space, day use of guestrooms and meeting space is an interesting revenue opportunity.”

Another area that deserves a solid nod is virtual reality (VR). Already a boon to a hotel’s marketing arm by enabling guests to virtually try-and-feel the experience before booking, COVID-19 raises the idea of bringing VR stations into empty meeting rooms to help guests choose local adventures, tours, and entertainment. Hotels can further augment these tech rooms with Wii activities such as virtual golf and tennis.






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Courtesy of Inn at Laurel Point

## Designing Spaces for Tomorrow

When it comes to design, you can't get much better authority than Jean-Michel Gathy. His design firm, Denniston, has produced hundreds of the world's most elite hotels, including the iconic three-acre SkyDeck, suspended 57 stories atop Singapore's Marina Bay Sands. The platform's centerpiece is a 475-foot-long infinity pool—the longest elevated pool in the world.

"Every crisis changes industry," says Gathy. "After 9/11, the primary issue was safety. Now it's health, and we must adapt. Hygiene is the new security." So, for hotel architects like Gathy, what happens next?

"Ten years ago, if you wanted to be a go-to architect you had to be a green architect. Now it's illegal not to be," says Gathy. "I believe that in a matter of one to two years, the concept of health will become law for buildings in exactly the same way. It will be in the materials you can use, and the air and water systems you need to install."

Gathy goes on to explain that design will involve details like anti-microbial surfacing for everything from lobbies to side tables in the restaurant and back-of-house; self check-in kiosks; limits to how many people can ride in an elevator; and elevator programming that shuttles guests directly to their floor.

"There will be auto-cleaning metals in bathrooms and special resins

on the floors, and walls that viruses cannot stick to and survive on," says Gathy. "Special invisible plastics and removable films will cover TV remote controls, faucets, showerheads, and door handles. Air and water delivery systems will be filtered and purified. Basic rooms will give way to more studios and suites with kitchens and laundry facilities to reduce housekeeping and room service interactions."

Within five years, Gathy predicts, "All of these things will be standard in the hotel industry, especially at the highest end."

## The Last Word

In the short term, hoteliers will continue to pivot their way through current challenges as they welcome close-to-home travellers. "Because Canadians tend to be very understanding and accepting, they are more willing to 'go with the flow' with the many changes that are happening within the hospitality industry," says Dr. Robson. "By the time the market opens to a broader spectrum of travel, a lot of what is being tried right now will have been finessed and international travellers themselves will be better equipped and more informed as to what to expect. By then, the industry will be implementing long-term solutions in terms of design, infrastructure, and technology. And it will be all the stronger for them. ■