A Q+A Session on Hospitality Design

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w/ Alberto de Salvatierra

AS: What does hospitality design entail?

GN: Hospitality design encompasses so much of our built environment, it is almost easier to ask, “What does hospitality design not entail?” The archetypes for consideration in hospitality are not only limited to hotels and casinos—although these represent trillion-dollar industries that are always a part of the conversation—but extend to every facet of guest experiences: transportation hubs, restaurants, retail and convention spaces, performing arts venues, sports stadia; the list goes on. Even the design of offices and workspaces is increasingly a matter of balancing leisure and productivity with an emphasis on employee experience and wellbeing.

AS: This must extend into healthcare and other industries as well, then.

GN: Yes. Some of healthcare’s biggest trends are in medical tourism, which focuses on bringing lessons learned from hospitality into the design of treatment and preventative care environments.

AS: And what about schools?

GN: Actually, schools whose architecture are informed by hospitality design principles—like “Hospitality Hall” designed to emulate world-class resort architecture at the center of UNLV’s main campus (a project by SoA alumnus Michael Del Gatto of Carpenter Sellers Del Gatto Architects)—are seeing higher rates of student engagement, recruitment, and retention. Even housing is becoming a matter of hospitality: think “staycation” and the implications of Airbnb. Lessons learned through hospitality design are truly applicable across the entire architectural industry.

AS: But hospitality design is not new; it has been in practice for decades. Are there any factors that make it especially relevant today?

GN: Worldwide tourism has seen steady growth every year for well over a decade and it is forecasted to double again by 2030 with an estimated 2 billion annual travelers. What is most interesting is that lesser known destinations are developing to reap the benefits—and this creates tremendous opportunities to design smarter and more cohesive built environments across the country and around the world. As travelers become ever more discerning, they will choose to be “locals” in cities that extend experiential design sensibilities to broader contexts that serve residents as well as tourists.

AS: Glad you bring this up. What are some additional current and future trends in hospitality design?
Many in hospitality are trying to focus efforts around guest experiences with digital technology. eSports is huge, and robotics is transforming potentials on the service side of hotel operations.

And how does the city of Las Vegas fit into this landscape?

Las Vegas is often seen as a model of hospitality design. Design researchers can engage “The Strip” and its surroundings as a living laboratory to test design ideas that not only address the needs of the transient tourist population or the economic sustainability of the resort corridors, but their relationships to larger social and environmental sustainability issues (along with the city’s potential as the intellectual capital of the hospitality industry).

The city must be an incredible resource for the pedagogy at UNLV.

We have been very fortunate to work with campus and community partners both formally and informally for the past several years. Critics on design reviews often include CEOs of major resorts and principal architects or lead designers from industry-leading firms: Klafter Wald Architects, Marnell Architecture, YWS, Gensler, CSD Architects, Wynn Design, BUNNYFiSH Studio, Friedmutter Group, and many more. Research sponsors have included MGM Resorts International. The UNLV International Gaming Institute and the American Gaming Association have been collaborators on countless projects. Essentially, connecting our pedagogy with the Las Vegas community also means we are capable of contributing to the global hospitality industry because Las Vegas—and UNLV—is in many ways the center of that world.

Remarkable. What sort of projects are our students currently working on?

Some of our M. Arch candidates have presented design research at international conferences proposing digital kiosks as part of “Post-Occupancy Evaluations”—gauging guest satisfaction and preferences toward various design revisions in hotel spaces. Others have taken different approaches to identifying best practices for integrating eSports throughout IRs (integrated resorts). Last fall, four of our graduates (Matthew Bogan, Alex Klenk, Jas Le, and Thanh Le) were invited to present “TED-Talk” style presentations at G2E.

You mentioned robotics earlier—undeniably a hot trend right now. How are we interfacing with that?

The HD Studio has had the pleasure of collaborating with the UNLV Robotics Lab to envision “hotel rooms of the future.” The conversations amongst students and faculty led to design schemes for a hub of robotics education, entertainment, and research. And while many of the current trends focus on the intersection of the built environment and millennials, the HD Studio has been proud to also have research that takes a long view into the future by recognizing the cyclical nature of generational theory and how it can inform design decisions for buildings that should responsibly contribute to the economy, society, and the environment for generations to come.

In addition to the UNLV International Gaming Institute, do we have any cross-collaboration with other departmental units?

Yes. Colleagues in the William F. Harrah College of Hospitality are now getting involved, too. We are starting a new student team for The John Hardy Group’s Radical Innovation in Hospitality Competition, which will further encourage interdisciplinary collaboration to generate even more ideas across a wide gradient of interests.

I hear our students have had a history of success with this competition.

News gets around! Yes, one of our recent M. Arch graduates, Juan Orduz, won the competition in 2016, and Brandon Siebrecht, an SoA undergraduate, won in 2017! Yasmin Abdelfattah Soliman, the 2015 student winner, joined our M. Arch program last fall—also receiving the John Klai, FAIA Honorary Scholarship. We will also likely sponsor a traveling trophy—Rebels of Radical—to recognize top hospitality design talent and encourage students to continue their studies at UNLV.

All this fertile activity and production begs for dissemination. How can students and/or researchers outside the program get access to any of this research?

The UNLV Libraries have invited the HD research books and posters to be a part of the Digital Scholarship Collection—including those of the past several years. Many of our guests at final reviews express interest in having hardcopies of these works as well, and I will explore options to make these publications more accessible in the future.

Notes