

BFUF ARTICLE

TITEL: The innovation of things in hotels

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1 / INTRODUCTION

Everywhere, humans are surrounded by things: materials, objects and substances that can be observed, touched and handled. This is also the case when vacationing. Hotels are material as they are laid in landscapes of sand, grass and asphalt. They consist of bricks and mortar, and inside of them, reside beds, tables, cutlery, towels, etc.

Tourists consider the materiality – the things - of hotels as do hotel proprietors when they promote and market their facilities. However, this materiality is often relegated by both tourists and proprietors into non-material service terms. “Authentic décor” may mean anything from carved stone walls and open fireplaces to brass period lamps and worn-out velour arm chairs, and the wording is meant to create a special atmosphere to please the senses. Without necessarily specifying this directly, “comfort” is a synonym for objects, such as adequate heating systems, new mattresses, self-service coffee brewing equipment, etc. Likewise, the staff is often claimed to be “friendly and efficient”, symbolized by warm smiles, but they can be so only because of the existence of technologies, such as elevators, computers, and vacuum cleaners. The term “luxury” masks a materiality related to, for example, marble and gold, and luxury is often equated with the physical size and the rarity of objects, where bigger can often be more luxurious.

Over the past nearly two decades, a strong conceptual tsunami related to an “experience economy” and “storytelling” has taken the tourism sector by storm. Subsequently, managerial buzz has recommended rethinking the non-material and symbolic ingredients of tourism products and concluded that non-material issues are far more noteworthy and critical than the material components (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Considering the fading competitiveness and attractiveness of average tourist facilities in the 1980s and 1990s, this new paradigm was, in fact, much needed. The tourism literature from recent years demonstrates numerous successful applications, where narratives and service amendments helped to raise interest, value and prices of tourist products (Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2009; Mossberg, 2008). When it comes to hotel innovations, an emphasis on the non-material elements of the product and service have been envisioned and enacted upon on a large scale. This emphasis on the service components can be observed from other contributions in this publication, where innovations in Swedish hotels, to a considerable extent, consist of process improvements in the relationships between customers and staff, and new ways to handle communication using new marketing platforms. Regarding the resource assets in hotels, recent studies demonstrate a clear focus on the competency and capabilities of the staff, managers and owners.

The experience economy tsunami is not over, and becalming it totally would be a mistake. However, the argument in this article is that it is time to re-appreciate the material dimension in tourist facilities. This is not about throwing the baby out with the bathwater regarding the experience economy era but rather to suggest a new direction. Storytelling cannot compensate and replace materiality entirely. Hotels are good cases, as mentioned above, they are highly material. Hotels are also interesting because they continuously appear in innovation surveys as generally less innovative than, for example, attractions and transportation enterprises (Hjalager, 2014). The claimed backwardness and apparent conservatism of hotels have raised assumptions that innovation might not be measured in the right way and that some unattended innovative endeavors take place behind the scenes, not fully regarded as

innovations by managers, staff and external observers. This needs further examination.

In this article, the term “materiality” is used about things in hotels. Multiple kinds of new materiality bring changes to the way that both people and enterprises organize their lives, communicate and socialize. In this article, the material aspects of innovation in hotels is illustrated by examples of innovations relating to buildings, food, robotics, travel accessories and waste products. The examples stem from tourism research literature and trade and trend spotting evidence, and they are selected with the aim of discussing the material related nature and direction of innovations in hotels.

2/THE MATERIALITY OF BUILDINGS

We are used to thinking that hotels are houses built with the use of materials such as concrete, wood, glass, plaster, etc. Buildings are designed by architects and engineers and are meant to stay there for a long time. They should be durable and resistant to the most rapidly changing fashions. However, innovative hotels concepts introduce other approaches to building materials and building concepts, and by doing so, they may transform some of the paradigm of the hotel and what it can do for travellers.

The Copenhagen Biker Hotel is established in a derelict industrial site in the outskirts of Copenhagen. The hotel rooms are steel shipping containers. Each container is furnished with a bed, table and lighting. It is organized in such a way to allow room for a biker to unload his luggage and equipment. Very importantly, the bikes can also fit into the room, allowing the biker to sleep with his dearest companion, the machine. The reception area of the hotel in an old auction hall is equally rough, desk built with pallets, and breakfast area with the same type of furnishings. Padlocks constitute the key system. The Copenhagen Biker Hotel is a pop-up arrangement for the summer and will possibly survive for only one season in its particular location. Next year it might move to another derelict place, occupying the buildings and asphalt until they are needed by other functions. During the winter, the containers and pallets might be part of a completely different flow of materials, traveling the world on lorries or container ships.

Mobile buildings and flexible materials are not unknown in tourism; for example, tents play an important role in camping, festivals and events. The Biker hotel illustrates even more radically that reassembled materiality can lead to innovative tourism facilities, suggesting that design is not always meant for perpetuity. In that case, the attractiveness for the users is connected to the materials' roughness and hardness but also to knowing that the thing will be gone again eventually. In the materiality, there is a non-verbal meaning that matches well with the feeling of restlessness on the road.

It might seem as an outright paradox, but Singapore has launched a vision of becoming a "garden city". This involves a momentous vertical greening of the many concrete towers in the city. The hotel PARKROYAL on Pickering chose to comply with the city's ideas to increase overall attractiveness of the hotel's services. Referring to solid medical evidence, the green environments will benefit the wellbeing of customers. The vegetation is pleasing for the eyes and it helps to provide an image, if not the reality, of a cooler atmosphere. The greening is also a sustainability measure, and the consistency of the greenness and greening may be of importance for the competitiveness of the hotel and the destination overall. In the process of greening itself, the hotel faced many challenges as not all garden and park plants can grow in elevated environments. Although not mentioned in connection with PARKROYAL on Pickering, an important step involves the incorporation of vertical agriculture, where the fruit and vegetables used in the kitchens are grown on a facade, fully visible for the guests.

Recycling, upcycling and cradle-to-cradle concepts are starting to affect hotels. Sherwood Hotel in Queenstown New Zealand is keen to show that old – and thereby

carbon negative - cork panels can be used for wall linings, and the material is found to deliver very welcome effects in terms of insulation and acoustics. Floor tiles are made from 70-80% recycled old nylon fishing nets, and the rubber compounds from car tires are also recalculated into surfaces. Italian army blankets retired from service now serve as curtains.

Building materials are not only about functionality; they are also about beauty. The simple material fatigue and degradation, which are gradually observed over time in all tourist environments, are rarely found charming. However, Italy is resplendent with the materiality of decadent and expressively beautiful decaying building materials, which no one would dream of replacing with new materials. Hotel Burchianti in Florence is proud of the hollow 17th Century floor tiles that - because of high original quality meant to last - increase their beauty with every extra step taken on them. The hotel takes good care of the frescos, a material testimony of history, which no modern industrialized surfaces can compete with.

3 / THE MATERIALITY OF FOOD

Contributors to the wealth of knowledge regarding the experience economy love to mention coffee as a common example (Boswijk et al, 2007). The beans are largely indifferent, and as such they have a low price. Processing and packaging add value, but the big leap occurs in the delivery systems and concepts for the coffee. A coffee bar, with Starbucks often mentioned as a prime case, can stage the coffee experience and ensure a far higher value than the coffee bean itself. The way that the coffee is brewed, the aromas in the room, the dialogue between the guest and the barista, and not least the personalized award systems and recognitions contribute to the totality of experience.

However, no matter the importance of the service ingredients and social codes, the materiality of the basic food materials must not be overlooked in the context of tourism innovation. A visit to the breakfast room, the conference lobby, or the snack bar of a hotel will illustrate that the quality and variety of the food materials are not at all as insignificant as in the coffee example. Service gags, narratives, storytelling and decorative staging cannot replace a genuine concern for food as a materiality. The fact that the guests need to put the food into their mouths adds to the importance of food's materiality.

Consumers care about food, and tourism businesses are fully aware of this. Food development in hotels follows food trends, in general, closely and, to a large extent, the supply is determined by what catering companies can deliver. This may contribute to the explanation of why hotels are not often found to be significant and independent innovators in the food and beverage. Strictly material dimensions of food include sensory elements such as taste, odor and texture but also nutritional composition, origin, production method, etc. Additionally, food is exceedingly culturally contextualized, where many of the parameters and the combinations hereof are parts of cultures and belief systems. Ensuring a compliance between the materiality and the social perception of food is essential.

Luxury hotel Tschuggen Grand in Switzerland claims to have fully committed to "Clean Eating". Clean eating is not a diet or a dogma, but nevertheless it suggests that food acquired in other places might be "dirty". The hotel offers a very large variety of menus in its restaurants and to ensure a feasible profile, it limits itself to the belief in the benefits of eating healthily and naturally. The aim is to ensure that no empty calories from white flour, refined sugar or additives such as flavoring and colorants are used when cooking. Dishes represent a balanced ratio of protein and carbohydrates, the kitchen insists on using only healthy fats, natural fruits and regional vegetables.

Some hotels take more radical steps and specialize in providing the food options for people with different health and nutrition challenges. The all-inclusive Paladium Hotel Group with resorts in Europe and South America developed a program for guests with dietary restrictions. The hotels established systems to cater to gluten-free and Type 2 diabetes diets and the following seven other common allergy/special diets: nuts; fruits and vegetables; seafood; egg; dairy and lactose; fish; and monosodium glutamate. The chefs need to collaborate with professional dieticians and create allergy-compliant recipes so they can offer guests an array of gourmet options. Guests identify their food allergy at check-in and are given a color-coded card to show to waiters. Selections from the buffet and a la carte menus are labelled with color codes that match the personalized color-coded card.

Smaller hotels often specialize in servicing specific customer segments, and sometimes they can establish market offerings with food as a very important parameter of this niche. For example, hotels Almodovar in Berlin and La Richardiere in France are vegan hotels. They make use of the widespread NGO networks that have food as a focus to promote their special attention to food ingredients. The same can be said about hotels that choose to accommodate guests requiring paleo diets, GMO-free or organic food, or other trendy styles.

Food Ink in London is a restaurant that has a unique take on materiality. They produce decorated, 3-D printed food, and the printing process can be observed by the guests. Broccoli might still taste the same, but the texture and the appearance of the food changes completely in the printing process. Thus, the technological opportunities have changed the ideas of food ingredients. To match the industrial atmosphere, the interior and the accessories of the restaurant, such as the cutlery, chairs, tables, etc., are also 3-D printed.

4/THE MATERIALITY OF ROBOTS

Personal contact – the human service touch - is claimed to be of immense value in tourism. Most tourism enterprises exert a great effort into training the personnel to communicate well and empower them to be able to solve any guest's problem. There is strong evidence that guests remember the diligence of the concierge, the waiter and the housekeeper, and satisfaction is related to the level and quality of the service. It influences positively the propensity to revisit or to recommend the hotel to others.

However, salaries for humans are often costly, not the least in the Nordic countries. For that reason, robots have been employed for some time to perform service functions. They mostly work behind the scenes, out of the view of the guests, where they clean pools, mow the lawns, vacuum the carpets and clean the windows. However, a newer wave of “collaborative robots” is emerging. This generation of robots is better equipped with sensing and mobility abilities and they are more flexible and adaptive in assisting staff and guests (Ford, 2015).

Some hotels are deeply integrated into the value chains of transportation companies, and for them, materiality and the seamless service chain can be enhanced by robots. Yotel Hotel in New York installed a luggage handling system that makes the interference of both porters, bells boys and guests nearly obsolete. A robotic arm handles all luggage, stores it, and ensures that it is forwarded to the room or the airport when needed. The hotel boasts of being a first-mover in technology investments, and instead of hiding the machinery, it is all visible for the guests to admire. The whole hotel has a futuristic design; for example, the rooms are small and equipped in such a way that also takes inspiration from robotics.

The Henn-na Hotel—staffed by robots—is located just outside the Huis Ten Bosch Amusement Park in Nagasaki, Japan. The hotel lets its guests get a real peek at what an almost-human-intelligence robotic world can deliver. Animatronics are combined with Artificial Intelligence (AI), and robots are nearly capable of performing lifelike hotel-related tasks such as answering front desk inquiries, handling check-in and check-out, issuing parking tickets, pointing out and explaining the way to facilities, etc. Behaving as close to a human as possible, each robot uses AI to interact with guests using natural speech through a voice synthesizer. When spoken to in English, they will respond in English. The robots instantly identify the language of the guest; then, they proceed to provide customer service in that language. Camera eyes in the robots send a video feed to a computer that uses facial recognition to personalize the robots' interactions. To increase confidence, some of the robots are made to look like humans, even if this was not strictly necessary. The hotel also experiments with animal or machine appearances of the robots, thus suggesting that, over time, guests will get used to the idea of the materiality of the technology.

The Henn-na Hotel is a part of an amusement park. Attractions are found to be generally more innovative than hotels, and in this example, parts of a fantasy world soon moved next door to the hotel. Hotels might want to look closer into the worlds of entertainment to achieve inspiration for innovations in materiality.

Humanoid machine assistance is rapidly entering eldercare facilities. We still wait for convincing examples in tourism where robots can perform tasks, such as taking guests on guided tours through the hotel garden or explaining the best exercises in the gym. Animation and entertainment for children might also be delivered through robots if safety guarantees are included with the service.

5/THE MATERIALITY OF ALL THE THINGS THAT GUESTS BRING IN AND OUT

It is commonplace to see travellers carrying enormous amounts of luggage with them, although some make a point of traveling light. It is of critical interest for innovations in hotels to observe, analyse and understand what tourists carry with them and what they choose to leave at home. It is also essential to be aware of the belongings left behind in hotels after a visit, generally regarded as waste. Accordingly, there are significant but often unattended flows of materials in and out of hotels, orchestrated by the guests.

The possessions of the guests bring many challenges to the hotels. The inevitable electronic devices require plugs and sockets, Wi-Fi access, and adapted lighting and tables. This includes rooms, conference facilities, and relaxations areas. The Biker hotel mentioned above can house motorcycles, but some guests may bring with them more difficult to accommodate possessions. Horses, for example, are welcomed in hay-hotels.

Business travellers often travel light. Hotels are usually very imaginative in terms of what they may need as follows: an iron, slippers, a dressing-gown, a tooth brush, etc. Food and drink items are available in the mini bar. Anttolanhovi Hotel and Spa in Finland provides spa products in a pampering mini bar. Such offers are responses to developing consumer behaviour.

The era of “simple living” is booming, and some hotels see the anti-conspicuous consumption as an opportunity rather than a threat. Over the past few years, the value of books has changed in the minds of many people as follows: Books are no longer a solid stock of knowledge and money, sitting rigidly on the shelves in the home library. Rather, books have become interchangeable objects, a shared and social capital. Hotel Rex in San Francisco has a library bar, where guests are invited to book swaps. They bring a book or two, and they take a book or two with them when they leave, usually after having had a few drinks and book chats with staff and guests. Books left over are “donated” to the library bar for other guests to enjoy.

It may be that hotel guests do not want to think too much about what they leave in the waste bin or the toilet, but some eco-hotels are painstakingly aware of waste as both a problem and potential resource. La Sirena in Columbia boasts of its composting eco-toilets, from which materials are carefully re-integrated into the local agricultural ecosystem.

Food waste is occupying many hotels of all categories because this is a costly and negative side effect of operations. Alternative measures include composting, animal husbandry and donation programs. Combining social and environmental responsibility with sustainable, responsible and material-aware tourism, the US foundation Clean the World picks up soap and shampoo from hotels. These resources are recycled and distributed to the developing world. Hyatt Hotels subscribe to this service. Accordingly, for ultra-responsible hotels, it is not enough to

only comply with the official and mandatory environmental procedures and standards.

6/PERSPECTIVES

This article has scrutinized some aspects of materiality in hotels. Using challenging examples from all over the world, the goal of this article was to illustrate that the service focus of hotel innovation needs to be supplemented with careful analysis of objects, things and materials to harvest wider benefits from innovations. Hotel innovations are not only associated with a multitude of signifiers but also with material objects that institute change and that drive owners and staff to create and orchestrate service developments. Accordingly, some innovations are distinctly materiality or technology driven, but the full benefit may emerge only in symbiosis with other kinds of managerial, organizational and service innovations. Being highly dependent on consumers' assessment and appreciations, the full competitive advantage is obtained when intermingled with marketing and communication innovations.

The hotel sector more than ever needs to ensure and increase its competitiveness. This article suggests to work with materials, and it reminds the reader of the great variety of materials that hotels encounter every single day as follows: solid, durable, non-movable materials that constitute buildings and equipment, objects that can be and will be moved as a part of daily operations, and materials and substances that are transformed during the preparation, consumption and discarding of food. This also includes the deterioration processes, such as corrosion, oxidation, mechanical wear and climate imposed deformation. Creating better, more attractive and interesting hotel services requires that staff and owners rethink transformations and engage in the material world, and thus reflecting the ever-changing hybrid nature of materials, services and experiences.

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