

Sustainability and Hotel Design

Understanding the Gray Areas of Going Green

by plumMohair

As a design and procurement firm, we are often asked for sustainable design solutions. The public has greater awareness of the importance of sustainable design and more regulations are being put in place for energy and water efficiencies. The hotel industry has been moving toward sustainability and the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) is working to modify LEED certification to meet the unique challenges of the industry. Hotel owners are embracing sustainable strategies that reduce the use of resources and thereby save operating costs. There are many things a hotel owner can do when moving toward sustainable solutions from using low VOC products, replacing lighting with energy efficient fixtures to upgrading the mechanical system. The Washington Lodging Association (WLA) has implemented a Green Program and is conducting pilot projects with two hotel companies. Additionally, WLA has a lot of information on how to best navigate the green waters.

When starting a project, have the conversation with your design team, set some achievable goals and implement those strategies. A good design team can educate the hotel owner and facilities management team as to what the sustainable opportunities are for the size and budget of the project. The best way to achieve this is to have a design charrette or brainstorming session at the beginning of the project that includes all participating parties (the owner, facilities, Interior Designer, Architect, Mechanical, Electrical and Structural Engineers.) All decision making parties will bring the best ideas to the table and discuss the feasibility of the sustainable opportunities. By the end of the session a set of goals should be agreed upon that the team can work toward.

It may be that some ideas can be implemented immediately and some may work on a longer term schedule. Creating this plan can give the owner a road map for future renovations and investing in the right areas at the right time to fulfill a long term renovation strategy. Replacing furniture and finishes in the rooms may be the first item and changing the mechanical systems may be appropriate for the future. Replacing old mechanical and electrical systems will have the greatest impact on a sustainable design but also may initially have a higher price tag. Your engineers can do a cost benefit analysis to show when the savings will pay back. Additionally, many local utilities now offer rebates for upgrading old equipment.

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Sustainable or “green” materials have come a long way and have become mainstream, no longer a trend but expected. Green design doesn’t have to look like it and is not limited or destined to appear “earthy”. The designer should evaluate what green aspect is most important to the owner. Is it a locally produced product or a product with a certain amount of recycled content?

Use decorative sustainable materials wisely. While prices have become competitive, they can be more expensive. When used in small quantities, in high visual impact areas they can give the hotel a great overall look, won’t impact the overall budget and can impress the customer. These materials should be used on items like a reception desk that doesn’t require a faster replacement. When it is time to renovate, the structure of the desk remains but can be re-clad to introduce a fresh look. Paint, artwork and lighting fixtures can easily be replaced to update the design. With the right planning, an investment upfront may save in future renovations.

There are many things a hotel owner should consider when deciding on a sustainable design. Following are a few ideas:

- Use low VOC paint and finishes
- Buy local which will support the local economy and use less fuel to get the product to the site
- Buy organic food from local growers if you have a restaurant, compost the waste and donate surplus food to local food banks
- Switch to green cleaning supplies and upgrade to energy efficient appliances and low flow fixtures
- In urban areas, offer customers free bus passes or site-seeing tours within walking distance

For large projects, a LEED Certified building is a great way to measure the metrics of the design, obtain huge energy efficiencies and promote the property as a LEED Certified hotel. For smaller renovations, there are plenty of ways to bring sustainability to the hotel without obtaining certification. Most importantly, the owner should start the conversation with the design team and set the right goals early on.

Annette Carson Rogers is a Principal and Interior Designer at the design and procurement firm plumMohair. She is a LEED accredited professional and has worked on LEED Certified projects as well as sustainable strategies for a variety of clients. Please visit our model room at the 2010 WLA Trade Show to learn about more ideas that can be easily implemented today.