

Interiors with Intent

Design is becoming a powerful tool in crafting immersive experiences that reflect local heritage and traditions, turning hospitality spaces into living stories.

By Bindu Gopal Rao



Hospitality design is becoming a powerful tool in crafting immersive experiences that reflect local heritage and traditions.

Hotel design is an integral aspect of its ethos, even as it becomes all about cultural storytelling and local immersion.

Crafting Stories

Hospitality design is becoming a powerful tool in crafting immersive experiences that reflect local heritage and traditions. Design today is so much more than how a space looks – it’s about how it makes you feel.

“By thoughtfully using local materials, patterns, and textures, we can create spaces that give guests a real sense of Mumbai’s heritage. It’s about making them feel connected to the city from the moment they step in. Every element of our hotel, from wall art to lighting to furniture, can tell a story. By incorporating Mumbai’s culture and history, we turn Novotel Mumbai International Airport into a living narrative. Guests don’t just stay here; they experience the city’s journey and spirit through the space itself,” says Rachita Sood, General Manager, Novotel Mumbai International Airport.

At Brij Hotels, design is a language that speaks of land, lineage, and lived emotion. Every property is deeply inspired by the soil it stands on. “We don’t impose design; we uncover it from the stories and traditions of the place. The result is architecture that belongs stone by stone, texture by texture, to its surroundings. From the earthy sandstone of Rajasthan to the soft laterite tones of Goa, every design detail celebrates a sense of place and cultural continuity,” says Udit Kumar, Founder, Brij Hotels.



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Malabar Resort & Spa, Cochin

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Design is not just a visual differentiator — it’s emotional. It defines how a guest feels when they walk through a space. Arjun Baljee, Founder of ICONIQA and President of Royal Orchid Hotels Ltd, agrees, “Design today goes far beyond aesthetics – it is a form of storytelling. At Royal Orchid and Regenta Hotels, we see design as a bridge that connects guests with the soul of a destination. Each property is conceived with a sense of place – whether through architecture inspired by regional heritage, materials sourced from local artisans, or art that narrates stories of the community. This approach allows guests not just to stay in a location but to experience it.”

Local Lore

Most hotels that are design-forward also ensure that there are local elements that are a conscious part, whether it is materials, crafts, or arts. Most hotels make a conscious effort to involve local artisans and source materials from the region. Every artwork, craft, or design element is carefully chosen to celebrate the identity of the city in which the hotel is located. By blending global hospitality standards with authentic local character, the hotel itself speaks a unique design language that also serves as a differentiator.

Lalith Viswakumar, Area Director – Operations & General Manager, Taj Malabar Resort & Spa, Cochin, The Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL), says, “We believe authenticity comes from involvement. From the very beginning of any design or renovation process, we engage local artisans and craftspeople. Their understanding of materials and techniques gives each space its soul. Coir, pottery, woodwork, and weaving are part of Kerala’s cultural vocabulary, and we ensure that these traditions are represented throughout the hotel.”

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“Nearly 98% of our staff is local, and during the resort’s construction, artisans from the region lived onsite for months to handcraft furniture and accessories. We relied heavily on local materials: repurposing felled trees, using reclaimed wood, and planting indigenous trees that naturally thrive in this ecosystem. Beyond materials, design also extends into stories: photographs of wildlife by local artists, traditional crafts displayed in rooms, and the local knowledge and wisdom that helped build Aahana.”

Contemporary Cues

Design trends are evolving with time, and sustainability is becoming central, from eco-friendly materials to energy-efficient designs. When design captures the rhythm of local life – from textures and colours to spatial layouts – it transforms spaces into narratives that unfold as guests explore them. Across the industry, there is a renewed respect for authenticity and sustainability. Guests are increasingly drawn to hotels that tell honest stories about where they are. Designers are focusing on natural materials, local influences, and a seamless connection with nature. There is also a shift toward softer, more personal spaces. Guests want hotels that feel human, not imposing. Technology is becoming more discreet, comfort more intuitive, and art is being integrated as part of the architecture itself.



Avni Tripathi, Director and CMO, Aahana Resort



Sonali Chauhan, General Manager, The Connaught, New Delhi, IHCL SeleQtions



Vijay Dahiya, Partner, team3



Amit Aurora, Partner at groupDCA



Mandeep Surie, General Manager, Taj Damdama Lake Resort & Spa, Gurugram



Ganeshram Iyer, Hotel Manager, ibis Styles Mysuru



Ram Shetty, General Manager, Grand Mercure Bengaluru at Gopalan Mall



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Sonali Chauhan, General Manager, The Connaught, New Delhi, IHCL SeleQtions, says, “In today’s landscape, what truly sets properties apart is character, and that is where design plays a defining role. SeleQtions was built around this philosophy: hotels that celebrate legacy, individuality, and a strong sense of place, bringing experiences to life through their location, décor, service, and cuisine. For us, that means a sensibility inspired by Georgian and Art Deco heritage with an unmistakably urban Delhi energy. Guests gravitate towards hotels that mirror the destination they have come to experience. When the property embodies the city, it becomes more than a place to stay; it becomes part of the journey.”

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Architect Speak

Every hospitality project has the potential to tell a story through words, space, material, and atmosphere. Design shapes how a guest experiences those stories, often from the very first moment of arrival.

“The journey through a hotel can be choreographed much like a narrative, where each space reveals a layer of the place it belongs to, its landscape, craft, or people. When details are drawn from the local context and interpreted with purpose, the space begins to feel alive and connected. The most memorable hotels are those that let guests feel where they are, where the design guides them through a story of culture, memory, and belonging without ever needing to say it aloud,” opines Vijay Dahiya, Partner, team3.

Hotel design today is being reshaped by the way people travel and the kind of experiences they seek. One of the strongest trends is a move away from formulaic models toward immersive, place-based design. A facade that borrows from traditional shading devices or a courtyard that echoes patterns of community gathering is no longer seen as nostalgic; it is now seen as a means of creating authenticity and identity.

Another significant trend is the rise of wellness and biophilic design. “Hotels are increasingly integrating greenery, water, natural light, and ventilation to create healthier, more restorative spaces. Flexibility is also redefining planning, with lobbies that double as co-working hubs, restaurants that transform into cultural venues, or guest rooms designed for both work and rest. At the same time, sustainability has become a core component of decision-making, influencing everything from construction systems to waste management. Technology, too, is present but more seamless, supporting comfort rather



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than overwhelming the guest,” says Amit Aurora, Partner at groupDCA.

Balancing Act

The real challenge lies in honouring authenticity without compromising modern functionality. Incorporating local art and craft isn’t about ornamentation but about creating a living dialogue between tradition and contemporary comfort.

Mandeep Surie, General Manager, Taj Damdama Lake Resort & Spa, Gurugram, says, “Equally important is maintaining the ecological and cultural integrity of the space as the resort expands. Preserving the natural topography of the Aravalli foothills while embedding local craftsmanship into a modern luxury framework requires deep collaboration between designers, artisans, and environmental experts. It’s a constant balance between preservation and progress, heritage and innovation, that ultimately defines the soul of the resort.”

In the economy hotel segment, design rooted in local culture provides a significant competitive edge. It is no longer enough to just offer comfort; travellers now seek a sense of belonging and connection. Ganeshram Iyer, Hotel Manager, ibis Styles Mysuru, says, “Guests want to understand the story behind the design, asking why a particular motif or craft is used. Design today is a fusion of modern amenities and global design sensibilities with a strong, unmistakable local flavour. Creating

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areas that can transform for events, festivals, or social media-focused moments and a focus that goes beyond just materials to include energy, water, waste management, and eco-mobility is what makes our hotel unique.”

Making a Difference

In an increasingly standardised world, design rooted in local identity helps create emotional connections. It’s no longer about luxury alone – travellers seek meaning and memories. A hotel that celebrates its surroundings through thoughtful design becomes instantly distinctive and memorable. The future of design is deeply human. There is a clear shift towards raw textures, adaptive reuse, and sensory storytelling.

Ram Shetty, General Manager, Grand Mercure Bengaluru at Gopalan Mall, says, “By positioning ourselves as a curator of local culture, we build stronger ties with our community, support the local economy, and create a truly distinctive product. The ultimate measure of our success is when a guest tells me they didn’t just have a comfortable stay but that they felt a genuine connection to Karnataka through their time with us. That emotional resonance is what transforms a one-time visitor into a lifelong advocate for our brand. In modern hospitality, that is the final frontier.”

Guests today value design that feels grounded, where imperfections become character, and comfort co-exists with consciousness. At the end of the day, hotels have realised that design is not static — it evolves as culture and communities evolve and becomes a continuous dialogue between the global and the local. Done right, design transforms a hotel into a destination where guests can truly experience the spirit of the city. ■