

Green Check-In: How Hotels Are Rethinking Design

Sustainable design is redefining Indian hospitality by moving beyond surface-level aesthetics and becoming integral to how hotels are envisioned, constructed, and experienced.

By Bindu Gopal Rao



Image courtesy: Toyama by Orohda Hotels.

Sustainable design is no longer limited to operational efficiency, it is fundamentally reshaping how hospitality spaces are imagined and experienced

Hospitality design is shifting toward low-impact architecture, climate-responsive planning, local craftsmanship, recycling-led construction practices, and immersive guest experiences that celebrate a sense of place.

Earth-friendly Escapes

The Indian hospitality industry is gradually moving towards more meaningful sustainability practices, although the depth of commitment naturally varies across brands. Guests today are far more aware and discerning; they can easily differentiate between superficial green branding and genuine environmental consciousness. This growing awareness is encouraging hotels to integrate sustainability into long-term operational and architectural decisions rather than treating it as a standalone marketing exercise.

Amruda Nair, Founder and Director, Araiya Hotels and Resorts, says, “At luxury retreats such as Aalia Jungle Retreat & Spa, sustainability is approached as a holistic philosophy that shapes the guest experience from the ground up. The retreat’s design language draws from the natural landscape and

local building traditions, incorporating handcrafted finishes, recycled material, soil-based wall treatments, wooden ceiling applications, and low-impact construction approaches that reflect regional identity and climatic sensitivity.”

While hotels have invested in measurable frameworks for renewable energy, water recycling, and local sourcing, greenwashing remains common. Examples include bamboo décor without operational discipline, water-intensive landscapes in drought zones, imported materials dressed up as eco-luxury. The real test is operational metrics: energy intensity, water per occupied room, waste diversion, and carbon accounting.

“Indian hotels are moving from construction-first to lifecycle-first thinking. The shift is real: passive cooling, vernacular materials, rainwater harvesting, solar integration, and smart building systems are becoming standard in serious developments. Guest expectations are driving this too: modern luxury travellers increasingly seek quiet, biophilic environments and cultural authenticity over scale and spectacle,” says Lalit Mundkar, General Manager, Fort Jadhavgarh.



Amruda Nair, Founder and Director, Araiya Hotels and Resorts



Lalit Mundkar, General Manager, Fort Jadhavgarh



Sharad Bajpai, General Manager, Toyam by Orchid Hotels

Low Impact, High Experience

The industry is moving beyond sustainability as a mere narrative, although the pace differs across segments. Guests are far more informed and can immediately distinguish between superficial eco-branding and genuine long-term commitment. For wellness-led hospitality brands, sustainability is not optional because wellness itself is deeply rooted in balance and mindful living.

“At Toyam, the idea is not to present sustainability as a separate feature but to integrate it naturally into the guest journey from architecture and wellness therapies to food philosophy and operational practices. That said, the industry still has room to evolve. True sustainability requires investment, operational discipline, and long-term thinking rather than isolated green initiatives,” says Sharad Bajpai, General Manager, Toyam by Orchid Hotels.

“Indian hotels are moving from construction-first to lifecycle-first thinking... Passive cooling, vernacular materials, rainwater harvesting, solar integration, and smart building systems.”

- Lalit Mundkar



Image courtesy: Araiya Hotels and Resorts

There is growing preference towards durable, responsibly sourced, and regionally inspired materials within hospitality interiors

“Climate-responsive design is not just environmentally important but operationally necessary, as hospitality brands look at long-term resilience and efficiency.”

- Gautam Munjal



Kunal Pahwa, General Manager, ITC Grand Central, Mumbai



Gautam Munjal, Founder, Minimalist Hotels

In wellness hospitality especially, guests seek authenticity and a deeper connection with the destination. Spaces inspired by local materials and regional sensibilities create both environmental and emotional sustainability.

Building Better Stays

There is a growing preference for durable, responsibly sourced, and regionally inspired materials within hospitality interiors. Trends such as biophilic design, natural textures, locally crafted décor, low-emission materials, and energy-efficient lighting are becoming increasingly prominent.

“At ITC Hotels, sustainability is reflected not only in

operational practices but also in design choices that maximise natural light, reduce resource consumption, and create spaces that feel connected to nature and local culture. Adaptive reuse is emerging as an important aspect of sustainable hospitality because it combines heritage preservation with environmentally conscious development. Repurposing existing structures significantly reduces the environmental impact associated with new construction while preserving cultural and architectural identity. It also aligns strongly with evolving traveller preferences for authentic, immersive, and locally rooted experiences,” opines Kunal Pahwa, General Manager, ITC Grand Central, Mumbai.

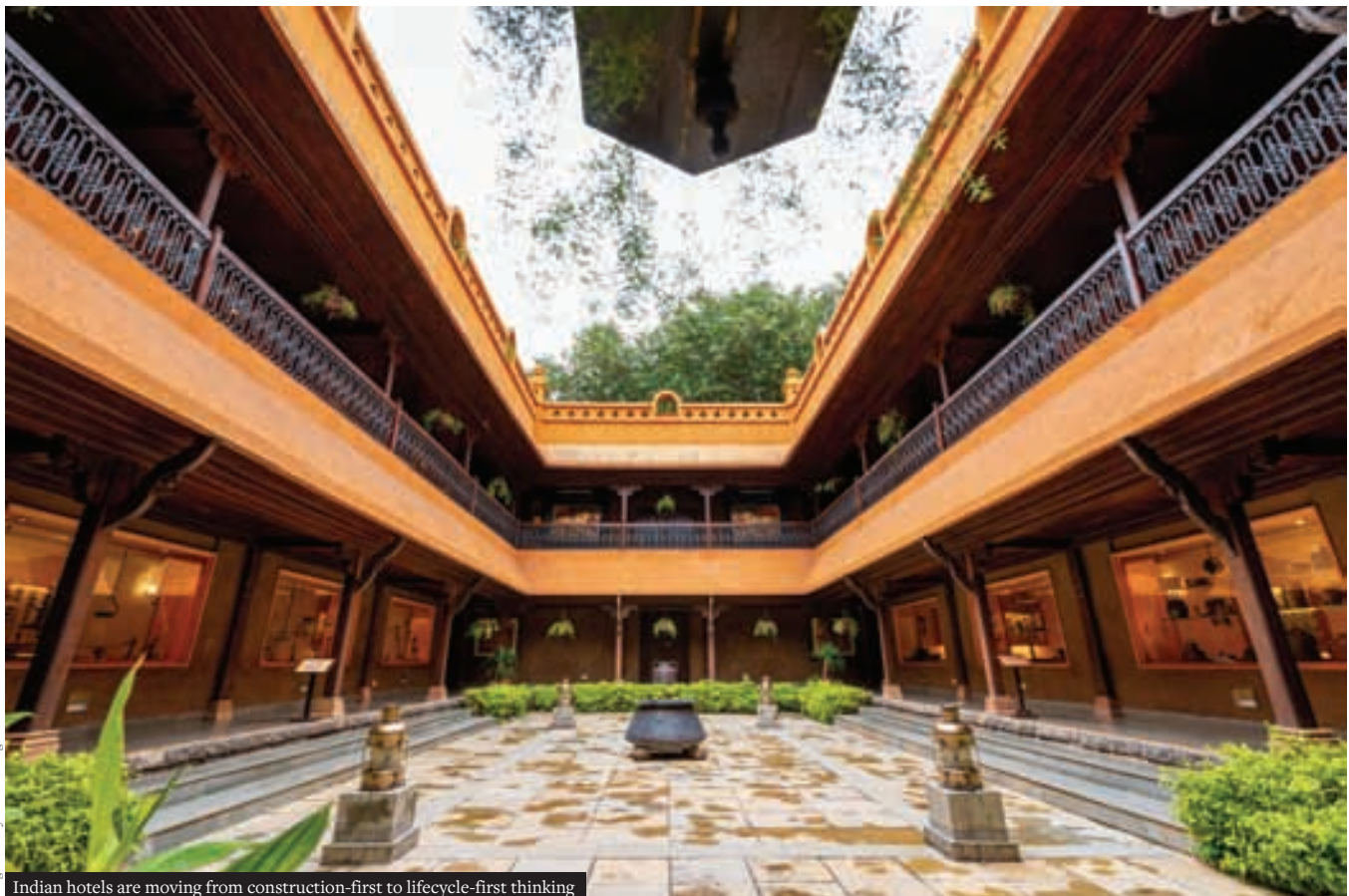


Image courtesy: Fort Jodhpurgadh.

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Climate Responsiveness

Architects across India are increasingly revisiting vernacular design principles because they naturally respond to local climatic conditions while significantly reducing environmental impact. Indigenous materials such as lime plaster, reclaimed wood, terracotta, stone, bamboo, and locally sourced timber are being embraced not only for their sustainability benefits but also for the authenticity and tactile richness they bring to hospitality spaces.

Climate-responsive architecture is becoming central to sustainable hotel design. Features such as shaded courtyards, elevated structures, cross-ventilation systems, deep overhangs, thermal insulation, and orientation-sensitive layouts help reduce dependence on artificial cooling and lighting while enhancing guest comfort organically.

“In ecologically sensitive regions such as the Himalayan foothills surrounding Aalia Jungle Retreat & Spa, architecture is increasingly designed to frame and respect the natural landscape rather than dominate it. The property’s traditional

wall-finishing methods using soil, cow dung, and chaff contribute to natural thermal regulation while reflecting centuries-old regional construction practices. Pine wood ceiling work further enhances insulation and creates interiors that feel warm, breathable, and deeply connected to the surrounding environment,” says Nair.

These approaches highlight how vernacular architecture is no longer being viewed as nostalgic, but rather as a sophisticated and climate-conscious design solution for the future of hospitality.

Addressing Issues

Hotels are adopting a combination of intelligent infrastructure and climate-responsive design to address environmental challenges.

Gautam Munjal, Founder, Minimalist Hotels, says, “Hotels are increasingly integrating sustainability at the infrastructure level rather than treating it as an afterthought. Rainwater harvesting, greywater recycling systems, solar integration and energy-efficient HVAC systems are becoming more common across new developments. Heat management is also driving architectural decisions — through insulated materials, shaded exteriors, landscaping and passive ventilation techniques. In a country like India, climate-responsive design is not just environmentally important but operationally necessary, especially as hospitality brands look at long-term resilience and efficiency.”

ITC Hotels, for example, has implemented initiatives focused on renewable energy usage, water recycling, rainwater harvesting, and efficient waste management systems as part of its responsible luxury approach.



Image courtesy: Toyam by Orchid Hotels.

Hotels are moving away from excessive, resource-heavy infrastructure and embracing more mindful architecture

“Several ITC Hotels properties have also achieved LEED Platinum, LEED Zero Carbon, and LEED Zero Water certifications. Design interventions such as optimised building orientation, insulated façades, daylight utilisation, and green landscaping further help reduce energy consumption and improve thermal efficiency,” says Pahwa.

Trend Check

Some of the most visible trends include the use of natural textures, handcrafted elements, recycled materials, locally sourced décor, earthy palettes, biophilic interiors, and minimalist aesthetics that create calm and reduce visual clutter.

“Hotels are also increasingly focusing on wellness-oriented interiors, spaces with abundant natural light, indoor greenery, organic fabrics, and layouts designed to improve emotional comfort and mindfulness. Another significant shift is toward timeless design instead of trend-driven interiors. Sustainable hospitality now values durability, authenticity, and emotional connection over excessive ornamentation,” explains Bajpai.

Sustainable Future

Hotels will increasingly move toward regenerative hospitality where properties aim not just to reduce harm but actively contribute to environmental and community well-being. Ultimately, the future of hospitality in India will be shaped by properties that create a genuine sense of place while operating in harmony with their environment, delivering experiences

that are not only luxurious but also thoughtful, restorative, and responsible. “The future of sustainable hospitality in India will be defined by contextual intelligence rather than one-size-fits-all solutions. Hotels will increasingly be designed around regional climate, local craftsmanship, resource efficiency and cultural relevance. Technology will continue to play a role, but human-centred and environmentally responsive design will become even more important. Guests are also seeking slower, more meaningful travel experiences, so hospitality spaces will need to feel emotionally grounded, operationally responsible, and deeply connected to their surroundings. Sustainability will eventually become a baseline expectation rather than a differentiator,” says Munjal.

Mundkar adds, “Six forces will define Indian hospitality design ahead: climate-resilient architecture, net-zero carbon standards, hyper-local identity over generic international aesthetics, wellness-sustainability integration, AI-driven building efficiency, and a shift toward regenerative hospitality – restoring ecosystems, reviving crafts, and replenishing groundwater. The brands that combine cultural depth with operational intelligence will outperform those still competing on scale alone.”

The future of sustainable hospitality in India will be driven by responsible growth, intelligent technology integration, wellness-focused design, and carbon-conscious infrastructure. Sustainability will increasingly become a foundational expectation rather than a differentiator. ■