

# THE ROLE OF PERCEPTIONS OF HOTEL INTERIOR DESIGN IN FORMING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

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## ULOGA PERCEPCIJE UNUTRAŠNJEG UREĐENJA HOTELA U STVARANJU ZADOVOLJSTVA GOSTIJU

### **Abstract**

Hotel interior design has the important role in forming customer's perceptions, by creating the sense of value, by gathering symbolic meanings, and by shaping the overall experience. Hotel design is closely connected to creation and transmission of messages and meanings to guests; all this suggests the significant role of design as a marketing segmentation tool, as well as promoting the specific identity in this highly competitive industry.

*Key words:* hotel, interior design, perception, meanings, ambient factors

### **Izvod**

Dizajn enterijera hotela igra važnu ulogu u formiranju percepcija gosta i njegovog osećaja vrednosti, tako što organizuje simbolička značenja i oblikuje celoviti utisak. Dizajn hotela je u vezi sa kreiranjem i prenošenjem poruka i značenja gostu; sve ovo sugeriše njegovu značajnu ulogu kao oruđe segmentacije, zajedno sa ulogom u promociji identiteta hotela u ovom visoko kompetitivnom domenu industrije.

*Gljučne reči:* hotel, dizajn enterijera, percepcija, značenje, ambijentalni faktori

## INTRODUCTION

One of the common definitions of a hotel is the one created by Forster: "An establishment offering accommodation and refreshment for travelers where a hotelier has a legal obligation to fulfil their basic needs" (Forster, 1993, p.17). The service is offered in its physical space, that is marked with clear boundaries, filled with facilities that contain style and interior design, among other things. The aim of this presentation is to focus on physical cues that form the holistic picture of the hotel, from the perspective of the customer. It would be the oversimplification to assume that the hotel guest will form the image of the value of the hotel simply relying on the star-grading. Research data have confirmed that the preferences of the hotel customers are not simply correlated with the official grade. Obviously, their experience of satisfaction is more complicated. Having this in mind, hotel business became more associated to the experience than to the formal services. The important question is what the role of interior design of hotel is, how important it is, and if so, what are the main

aspects of that design that are connected with the experience of the pleasure and satisfaction (or un-pleasure and dissatisfaction) by the guest.

Hotel interior designing is not a static activity; it is quite common that, for example, bedrooms would be refurbished in a regular interval because of wear and tear. Something similar stands for the wallpapers etc. Hotel management may simply replace the previous design with the same one, or may contemplate interior design changes. It comes as a surprise that those interior design innovations are rarely organized by interior design specialists; this may be a gross mistake, for the data provided by Lea (Lea, 2008) stated that “aesthetically aware hotels” have increased their profits considerably in the last decades. It may be of vital importance to obtain more insights into customer’s design aesthetic preferences, and designing hotels according to customers’ desires. According to Alfakhri, physical attributes are the third most important dimension after the brand and location of the hotel. Milliman states that “...In some cases the place, or more specifically, *its atmosphere, is more influential than the product itself...*” (Milliman, 1986 p. 286, italic author’s)

Strannegard and Strannegard have stressed the significance of hotel design, describing the example of the hotel that has two full time employees with specific jobs for designers with a duty to give aesthetic guidelines on everything from textiles and furniture to paper clips, to maintain the hotel brand, including improvements and repairs are needed as a result of daily usage (Strannegard & Strannegard, 2012). It is also of interest to point on the service of guest experience manager with a task to deal with the aesthetics of services, serving of food, way of cleaning then rooms, as well as to pay attention to even minute details, e.g. color of toilet paper, soaps and lip balms etc. Alfakhri states that “This is clear evidence to suggest that in practice, hotel managers believe in the importance of aesthetics, while providing pleasant surroundings and product that will maintain their brand and give them a unique competitive advantage” (Alfakhri, 2015 p. 66)

In order to offer pleasant and efficient designs, hotel managers are encouraged to consult design experts to achieve the desired goals professionally and benefit from all the mentioned positive outcomes.

Forster (1993) suggests three main factors that influence hotel design in general: market factors (e.g. trends, customer requirements, competition); new technology factors (e.g. enabling new services, choice of materials); and statutory requirement (e.g. legislation, construction requirements). It is stressed that “modern hotel managers should be skilled in dealing with “ETHOS”, (Environment, Technology, Human resources, Operations, and Security) (McMillan & Rossiter, 2006). There are different approaches to the studies of environment and interior design; Kotler offered divisions to aural, visual, olfactory and tactile clues (Kotler,1973). Baker stressed ambient factors, design and social factors (Baker, 1986). Bitner speaks of ambient and design factors that include spatial layout and functionality together with signs, symbols and artefacts. (Bitner, 1992)

## AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND ITS MEASUREMENT

Tourism managers pay an increased attention to providing the pleasant ambience, and frequently they consult the design experts. “Ambience has become a pivotal concern for tourism and hospitality managers worldwide. The relevance of and emphasis on ambience for creating a successful hospitality experience is evident from reading almost any travel-related journal or magazine... magazines frequently seem to give the impression that ambience is a key success factor directly linked to financial results” (Heide, Lardal, & Gronhaug 2007, p. 135). However, despite management’s interest, there is minimal empirical and theoretical research about ambience and its role in the hospitality industry (Heide et al., 2007). Addressing this gap, Heide et al. (2007) explored the knowledge of designers and hotel managers about improving their hotel ambience and concluded that they considered ambience by recognizing the importance of its factors.

In the contemporary literature and practice, ambient factors are recognized as a means for affecting customer’s behavior and attitudes, as well as gaining competitive advantages and popularity. But in general, the number of empirical research of this topic is small. There are many obstacles that are included in every empirical research of this kind: the main one is connected with the measuring of the aesthetic experience: it varies depending on the individual values of each subject of the research, and, as a rule, is affected by the educational background, preferences, expectations and, most importantly, overall impression of the hotel. Some of these variables are difficult to control. The strategy of “atomizing” the Gestalt of the hotel interior may lead to false conclusions, providing the very paradigm that the aesthetic experience is the “total reaction” to the integrated design attributes. In this way, the problem is gathering the experience and close insights into the question what a hotel guest matters mostly, as well as how they differentiate, and finally, what causes the preference of some part of hotel interior significant and which matters not. The problems are connected with the assumption that the guests have fixed aesthetic preference that is not necessarily to be correct.

Ryu and Han (2011) proposed one of rare conceptual models by which they tried to find some clues of the way how customers perceptions of physical environment affects discomfort, customer satisfaction, and the customer loyalty for the first-time and repeated customers. The conclusion was that that facility aesthetics, lighting, service staff and layout display significant effects on both customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

## INTERIOR CONDITIONS

Interior conditions provide the stimuli in the background of an environment that provide the gross impact on human sensations (Kotler, 1973; Turley & Milliman, 2000). These can be visual (e.g. colors), auditory (e.g. music),

olfactory, and temperature Bitner offers the broad statement that the ambient conditions pertain to any service aspect that affect any of the five senses, stressing the ambient interaction between customers and the physical surroundings (Bitner, 1992).

### **Auditory cues**

Humans are highly sensitive to sounds, including the sounds of music. Noise can harm the output of a worker, as well as music can accelerate productivity. Lin provided the data to explain that auditory cues, especially music, are important in influencing the holistic servicescape perception (Lin, 2004). Music as part of atmosphere and ambience affects customers' mood, service and product evaluations, as well as customer decisions. (Wilson, 2003) conducted a study in the restaurant industry investigating the impact of music on perceived atmosphere and purchase intentions. They concluded that music has an effect on customers and that different music types (e.g. jazz, popular, and classical) result in differences in atmosphere perceptions, purchase choices, time spent in restaurants, and the amount of money that customers are willing to spend. Some other studies conducted affirmed the assumption that a guest's perceptions of cafeterias are influenced by the type of music played there, and whether they like the cafeteria or not depends on their liking of the music played. Some other studies offered the data that suggest that speed of music influences the speed of eating and dining in restaurants.

It is supposed that hotel guests spend more time and money in hotel interiors or exteriors if they hear the music they perceive as appropriate. However, there is no research at present that would provide the empirical conclusions.

### **Scent as an ambient variable**

Scent induces a variety of customer interactions (e.g. bakery sale increase), and influences customers' evaluations, purchase intentions, revisiting, money and time spending (Matilla & Wirtz, 2001). Again, the role of scent in the hotel context is still not known, as these impacts emerged from studies in different industries. It goes without reasonable doubt that exploring the role of ambience in hotels is still needed. However, whether ambient conditions are influential or not for hotel guests, and how they relate to hotel interior design should be understood first.

### **Furnishing**

Furnishing is concerned with the look and comfort of available furniture. Seating comfort is about the physical seat design and condition (e.g. seats with back or bench seats, padded or not, deteriorating or new), number of available seats, and the space between seats (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). Individual preferences play the significant role here too: it seems that every individual has his own "psychological space", and its "boundaries", the proximity of the other may or may not be perceived as "intrusion". Although furnishing is a clear physical variable of any service environments, little research has examined hotel furnishing, so the perception of hotel furniture and its role for hotel customers are still not understood.

### **Space and layout**

Space relates to the spatial relationships between different objects (e.g. furniture) in a space or an environment. Ideally, hotel spaces should be large enough to allow guests to browse freely and easily, with intuitive clues which directions to undertake (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). The individual differences may play an important role in generating the overall conclusions: space is an element of vital structuring, but despite the general agreement about the importance of space, it was found that small spaces may be tolerated if other features are available, especially in cities with a lot of activities, and on short trips. However, for some customers, the spacious environment may provoke fear of void. For some other, the space may be too small providing the experience of general displeasure. Therefore, hoteliers should balance and be aware of what the priorities of their guests are and what their expectations are, especially as a result of their location and surrounding activities. Although it is often thought that hotel interior design is only related to visual cues, ambient conditions are perceived and considered part of the hotel interior design.

Ceiling height impacts spatial perception more than a space's length or width, and high ceilings are associated with spaciousness, while low ceilings are linked to coziness (Ching, 1996). Yet, the role and meaning of space for hotel guests is still ambiguous. Layout, on the other hand, is concerned with the positioning and arrangement of different equipment, furnishings and service areas, and the relationships between them in a space, and is concerned with the flow of customer movement within the servicescape (Bitner, 1992). Having a user-friendly layout may improve service dependability, enable service delivery, and reduce search time for customers (Sulek & Lind, 1995). However, layouts in which customers cannot move freely and easily will make them frustrated (Bitner, 1992). A proper layout will allow service areas such as restrooms be more accessible, will permit ease in movement, entry and exit, and will also fulfil hedonic needs and make customers enjoy the primary offered service (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). This indicates that layout is important for customers. The freedom of movement, intuitive moving through hotel interiors are experienced with pleasurable affects, while the abundance of signs and symbols frustrate or confuse the customer.

### **Color**

Eiseman (1998) argues that color is critical in physical interior settings. Colors can contribute to differentiating from competitors, influencing appetite, evoking feelings and moods negatively or positively, and forming attitudes (Singh, 2006). Colors can also decrease waiting time perception, and make customers easier to tolerate frustration (Singh, 2006). Colors have various roles and impacts apart from their role in forming visual appearance of objects and spaces, and they affect different individuals differently. Different colors are associated with various religions and cultures; but blue is known to be the most popular and agreed-on color among different cultures (Khouw, 2002). Some researchers argue that cool colors, especially blue, arouse pleasure and

encourage customers to spend time and money (Bellize & Hite, 1992), while others believe that colorful and bright environments have an effect on pleasure and arousal and encourage customers' patronage (Summers & Hebert, 2001).

Some researchers tried to test the effects of color in the interior design environment. The result was that .." as far as 62% of assessment was *based on color alone*. In this way, it seems that the use of color influences moods and feelings in a positive or negative way, and at the same time, it has lasting effects on the perception of the product. The use of colors may increase or decrease appetite, enhance moods, have impact on anxiety of customer, or decrease it, and may also have significant impact on the attitude to the perception of time they wait for the service."

With regard to the impact of colors on emotions, orange, blue, and yellow are found to be associated with happiness; while brown, black, and red are considered sad colors (Cimbalo, Beck & Sendziak, 1978). It is also found that colors are perceived differently between genders; men prefer grey, black, and white, while women are more tolerant to blue and red combinations (Khouw, 2002). Furthermore, red and yellow stimulate appetite, and help in gaining attention, which makes them the first choices for fast food restaurants (Singh, 2006). When used in lightings, color influences the sense of time passage, as it seems slow under red light and quick in blue light (Singh, 2006). Finally, colors are known to evoke brands and are linked to brand associations, differentiation, and awareness (Khouw, 2002). However, the meaning and role of color for hotel guests and its contribution to the overall design are still unknown. Hoteliers and designers should recognise the importance of the colors that they choose, and although tastes differ, they should focus more on white, light, and natural colours as the findings proved that they are generally preferred by customers. It is also important to note that the preference for colors is connected to the highly individual, early life experiences, as well as the symbolism of colors is not strictly confirmed.

### **Lighting**

In the conditions of poor lighting, there is no possibility to detect any shape and color. In this way the amount of lighting affects cognitive abilities including memories and mood. Lighting type is also of considerable interest for it appears to be connected to the perception of quality and definition of space and it reflects on the perception of other elements such as colors and textures. In the ambience of poor lighting, aesthetically appealing textures are useless and are not able to notice. From another point of view, certain lacks of colors or furniture may be perceived more pleasant if the lighting is appropriately organized around them. Some researchers from the field of the psychology of perception maintain that the light influences the senses more than any other attributes of interior. It is well known that the shadows, which are always connected with lighting, have the special psychological impact.

They may contribute to the feelings of intimacy, while the domination of bound shadows may provoke the feeling of unpleasant tension.

Stone and Irvine (1994) gave the empirical data to corroborate the intuitive assumption that spaces with windows decrease boredom, compared to rooms without windows. Artificial lighting is not the only means of influencing behavior and experience, the same stands for the natural lighting as well. However, it is of vital importance to stress that too much luminosity does not have the pleasurable effects.

### **Signs, symbols, artefacts**

It has been proposed that signs, symbols, and artefacts represent enormously important codes that are used for the purpose of interaction with clients, in the context of service: they have mighty influencing how clients move and behave. It is common in any hotel interior to post the visual clues of smoking and nonsmoking areas, guidelines for navigation through the hotel interior and exterior space (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011). Their importance goes beyond the pure facilitating of the movement; they also communicate the subtle information what level of service is to be expected. (Bitner, 1992).

### **Furniture**

Furniture is another key element in the hotel design from customers' point of view, which they judge by its comfort and aesthetic look. The photos of furniture in websites are also important to consider, because they influence customers' online booking and preference. Regarding style, although modern and classic are the most popular hotel design styles from customers' point of view, adding unique and cultural touches adds a lot of value. This statement was agreed by the majority of research. The importance of proper furnishing in the hotel context is related to the functionality and accessibility of the design and how it can be used, as well as to its aesthetic look. It is proved to influence the perception of the overall hotel design, customers' comfort, and their satisfaction.

**Artefacts and art pieces** (e.g. paintings, sculptures) have the same effect, because they may attract hotel guests' attention, influence their choice and preference and increase enjoyment and happiness. Although these are extra touches, their influence was found to be more important than expected and hotel guests seem to appreciate art and design more than hotel managers may think. There are many ways in which the art pieces may contribute to the overall positive perceptions of the hotel interior. In the case in which the hotel space is too fragmented into different subspaces, the repetition of the art pieces that represent the same or similar style would make an impression of unity.

Provision of glass and large sized windows makes a positive noticeable difference to hotel guests too, by making the outer view more accessible, making the place more airy, and enhancing light. Therefore, hoteliers should try to provide glass walls and windows as much as they can. Also, the availability of natural cues seems to have the same positive effect on guests, including the use of fresh flowers, greenery, and water, which hoteliers should consider and try to offer to their guests too.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although intuitively always recognized, the importance of interior design of hotel lacks broader and thorough research that would provide the guidelines for improving the perception of pleasure of hotel guest, which as profound outcome in influencing the guest satisfaction and loyalty. The sparse, and at present non-conclusive insights, provide the solid ground for deeper understanding of the impact of interior design in the competitive strives of hotels for their customers. The methodological problem of ambiguity of defining of the aesthetic experience would not have to be the obstacle to explore this important issue by all scientific methodological means available.

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