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HOTEL DESIGN FACTORS, AFRICA

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In today's global village, there is increasing pressure for differentiation. There was a time when hotel chains prided themselves on the uniformity of their properties – “anywhere in the world, you'll know that you're in one of our hotels” – sure, but where in the world am I!

In Africa, designers want to bring local “flavour” into hotel design, with plenty to work with – the rich colours of African textiles, for example, provide ample opportunity to place the hotel into its local context. An excellent example of this is the newly-opened African Regent hotel in Accra, Ghana, where the lobby and restaurant are beautifully decorated with African textiles, timber and other materials.

But behind the scenes, there are other design features dictated more by the operating environment than by the interior designer.

The (hot and humid) climate is a major influence on design, with the need for shading to reduce solar gain, and thus energy use in cooling bedrooms and other spaces. Back of house, cooling is required in all staff areas, and in stores, especially the garbage store – an area uncooled at your peril! Good design will ensure that doors are always self closing, to prevent the loss of cooled air, and revolving doors at the front entrance perform the same purpose, also keeping out the dust in the dry season. And when it rains in Africa – it RAINS! Control of water flow is a must, to prevent flooding and consequent damage.

In many locations, access to food and other supplies can be difficult, relying often on shipments from abroad, and this means greater storage areas than normal. This relates not only to consumables, but also to maintenance items like spare parts – when importing equipment from abroad, it is necessary to ensure a ready supply of spare parts, which often means buying several years' worth in advance –and storing them.

Higher employee numbers, due to lower productivity, also require larger areas for staff changing, dining and training rooms and the like.

In Nigeria, and other countries lacking in basic infrastructure, more drastic and costly measures need to be taken – all hotels need to be totally self sufficient, which means providing generators for power supply – not one generator, but at least two, of different outputs, so that management can save energy when the hotel is running at less than full capacity - a borehole for water, and a sewage treatment plant.



Anthony Ukpo, the owner of the Le Meridien Ogeyi Place Hotel in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, believes that such requirements increased the cost of equipping the hotel by 50 per cent – were it not for the fact that land is generally cheaper in Africa, this could cripple the economics of hotels.

And there are some cultural factors in Africa that influence design, sometimes in surprising ways. I nearly always specify tiles in guest bedrooms, because carpets attract insects, and in a humid atmosphere begin to smell. Keeping the air conditioning running to prevent that is too costly, and leaks from the a/c units damage carpets. But in the Saharan region, it is customary to sit on the floor to hold meetings and socialise, especially when a hierarchy needs to be preserved (with the senior person present on a chair above the others). So, carpet it is!

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