



An Eye on West Africa

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In many West African capitals, hotels are the social centres and business hubs of the city, providing a space for a quick meeting or a catching up with friends. The lobbies of places like the Hilton Abuja (Nigeria), the Mövenpick Ambassador in Accra (Ghana), the Hotel Pullman Abidjan (Cote d'Ivoire) and Hotel Pullman Dakar Teranga (Senegal) are virtually never idle. There are often informal business meetings on the go, social encounters and hotel guests milling around.

Historically, hotels in Europe and the USA were centres of social convergence. Coffee (or more often chocolate) shops and inns became hostelries with beds in shared rooms; hostelries became hotels with en-suite rooms and suites. And the trend from social hub to a bed factory meant that the lobby, which was originally the same space as the bar and restaurant, became a place to process people as fast as possible and get them into their rooms. This change led lobbies to become lifeless spaces, often filled with elaborate art pieces.

Even with head-scratching art pieces to take your mind off things, checking into a hotel isn't always the most pleasant experience. You often deal with front desk staff who consider the computer screen to be the main attraction of your visit, and you have to wait while reservation mistakes are rectified. With all the advances being made in airline check-ins – where you can do so online, get your boarding pass and seat number on your mobile phone, and go directly to the boarding gate – I think it's about time some of it is put to use in the hotel industry.

Hotels have focused largely on the room experience over the last

few decades, making their rooms attractive by offering guests all the things they didn't have at home – large TVs, rain showers, jacuzzi baths, Wi-Fi Internet connectivity, air-conditioning and luxury coffee machines.

However, I think we can broadly agree that there's not much more left to do in the rooms, which is why the hotel chains are returning their attention to their lobbies – to have these prime spaces contribute to the hotel's bottom line.

The intention is to make them into hives of activity, a flow of people in and out, purchasing food, drinks and other services. Sheraton have their Link@ Sheraton facility – in Lagos it is right in the middle of the lobby – with computers and tables for people to meet and chat. Guests access the Internet free of charge, but they pay for the coffee and snacks they inevitably consume. Social activity does tend to be technologically-enabled, so people sit with their tablets, laptops and mobile phones, all multi-tasking – surfing, emailing, talking, eating, drinking, and people-watching.

Starwood's Aloft brand goes a step further, with pool tables, big-screen TVs and other leisure activities right there in the lobby. They really encourage guests to leave their rooms, descend to the lobby and be part of the activity, whether that be actively participating or watching from the sidelines.

This activity needs to be monitored – and matched to the customers' expectations and aspirations – and the spending encouraged. The ambience can be changed through the use of lighting and music – bright lighting during the day, with soft background music for business

meetings. By turning down the lights and changing the type and volume of the music for the evening, you create a whole different vibe and invite a different clientele.

An interesting facility in some hotels is the "grab-and-go" self-service food store. For apartment hotels such as Suite Novotel, which have microwaves in the rooms, the store offers heat-and-eat dishes. A microwave right there in the store will enable a guest to heat and eat in the lobby. Chilled cabinets contain drinks, sandwiches and salads. This is a great way to combat the often unsatisfactory room service experience, as well as making good, commercial use of the available lobby space.

These very forward-thinking ideas aren't for everyone, and in somewhat conservative West Africa we're going to see these changes being made slowly.

Some guests want the solidity of the front desk – it's what they are accustomed to – and don't know what to do if it is not there. Make a guest, or potential guest, uncomfortable, and you've failed big time in my book. Some guests are not in a hotel to socialise – they value their privacy and prefer to spend time in their rooms. And the international hotel chains are in a wonderful position to be able to cater for both groups of guests fairly satisfactorily. ■

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