



[Link to Article](#)

Shared Space

Hotels are giving their lobbies a bigger footprint and larger role than ever before. Five chains tell us why.

by [Casey Gale](#)
April 2, 2018

Communal spaces in many hotels used to be limited to a café, bar, business center, and maybe a few chairs set around a coffee table in the lobby. Today, you're more likely to encounter bars that double as check-in counters and giant Jenga games surrounded by comfy couches and armchairs. Why the change?

Some call it the "Airbnb effect," the idea that hotels are trying to compete with the cozy, residential factor that Airbnb's homes-away-from-home provide. But hotels actually have a leg up on Airbnb when you consider Resonance Consultancy's recent "[2018 Future of Millennial Travel](#)" report's results. According to the study, millennial travelers prefer the hotel experience to Airbnb — more than 2 to 1. One of the reasons cited is that they like having the option to sit or work in communal gathering spaces with other guests — an element hotels can provide that private residences cannot.

There are other factors at work as well. In many cities, public outdoor spaces are shrinking, so people are seeking communal areas indoors. Others attribute the trend to the ever-present "[millennial mindset](#)" — the desire for experiences, rather than things — i.e., smaller hotel rooms and larger gathering spaces to make memories with friends, family, colleagues, and fellow travelers. And still others believe that the growth of a remote workforce has created a need for environments in which they can work on their laptops while surrounded by activity and other people with whom they could potentially connect — consider the rise of co-working spaces like WeWork.

No matter the reason, it's clear that communal spaces are increasingly popular at hotels — and that they pay dividends. All of Best Western Hotels & Resorts brands — not just its millennial-focused lifestyle properties — that invest in public-area expansions and renovations are seeing a 13-percent rise in revenue, according to Amy Hulbert, vice president, boutique and upscale brands. "When they incorporate things like communal tables and mixed spaces," she said, "guests are willing to pay more for that."

Convene checked in with other major chains to learn how hoteliers are building out these casual meeting destinations.

UPON ARRIVAL

At many emerging lifestyle hotels, gone are the days of picking up your hotel key from a typical front desk. Take Moxy Hotels by Marriott, for example, where you check in at the bar. “Check-ins are just a form of getting your stay started. But we don’t say, ‘Hey, checking in?’ We actually give you a welcome drink to start the experience,” said Toni Stoeckl, global brand leader, lifestyle brands at Marriott International.

Hyatt Regency, a 51-year-old brand, also pays close attention to how the check-in experience impacts the communal experience. “We are mindful of how we deal with hotel- colleague presence and transactional experiences in social spaces. No one wants to feel as if they are being watched over by the front desk host, for instance,” said Kristen Conry, vice president of global design services, Hyatt. “Yet people want to know that colleagues are nearby when needed or that they can easily access the things they want, such as power outlets and Wi-Fi everywhere. It comes down to striking the right balance both in terms of furniture settings and service and having everything they need at their fingertips to make for an effortless experience.”

PLAY TIME

One of the most marked differences between the lobby spaces of today and yesteryear is the emphasis on recreational activities, giving guests the chance to interact with each other without ever stepping off property. Tru by Hilton, a boutique brand that launched in 2016, has four main areas in its lobbies: Eat, Work, Lounge, and Play. The Play area allows franchisees to choose one table-game option, such as a pool table, foosball table, or shuffleboard “to center the area,” said Alexandra Jaritz, senior vice president and global head of Tru by Hilton. The area also includes a large media wall, as well as traditional board and card games for guests to play while seated on pillow-cushioned sofas.



Moxy similarly offers guests room to play, also featuring games like shuffleboard, pool, and foosball, as well as arcade games. “Playing is at the heart of everything we do,” Stoeckl said. “These things are designed to help guests that happen to be in the public space and enjoying themselves to actually play a little, together.” Moxy also hires and trains crew members to engage guests, further encouraging a sense of community. They might challenge a few guests to a game of life-sized Jenga, where the winner gets a free cocktail. On a different day, they might host a lip-sync battle in the public space. “We’re really looking to deliver an experience connecting with our travelers,” Stoeckl said, “on a much more emotional level.”

WORKING TOGETHER

According to InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG), by 2020, 50 percent of workers won't require a specific office space, and will work wherever they're most comfortable. For IHG, that means giving business travelers new communal spaces rather than confining them to business centers. The company is embarking on a \$200-million brand transformation program for its Crowne Plaza brand for which it is developing "Plaza Workspace," a co-working space that features five core elements: the Pod, Nook, Huddlespot, Studio, and Marketplace, built with different surfaces and seating arrangements to satisfy different types of workers.

At Tru, built-in alcoves with sound absorption give guests a dedicated workspace. At Moxy and AC Hotels by Marriott, a lifestyle brand, there are library areas where guests or visitors can settle in with a book, pore over a spreadsheet, or take a phone call. "It's a great space if you want to be still with others," Stoeckl said, "but you want to be alone together."

COZY ROOMS

As guests move toward communal spaces instead of working and eating by themselves in their hotel rooms, many brands are responding by shrinking their guest-room size to make way for larger common areas. Vīb, Best Western's urban boutique hotel concept, features a roughly 3,800-square-foot public space and a 200-square-foot standard King guest room — more than 100 square feet smaller than the typical Best Western guest room. Tru's lobby area is typically around 2,880 square feet, with a 275-square-foot Double Queen room. And Moxy gets even cozier, offering 183 square feet of standard guest-room space, while carving out approximately 3,800 square feet for communal space.

"As we looked at the value proposition, we want to make great spaces for guests — ultimately that is our first primary goal. But in order to get those spaces built, you need to be appealing to developers, too," Hulbert said. "The developers we're seeing in the marketplace are watching all those square footages, and make sure every square foot of the space, whether it is public or guest, is working for them."

Boutique hotels are working to design these smaller spaces in such a way, Hulbert said, that "you would never walk into the room and say, 'Oh, this is a little bit smaller than the room I stayed in last week.'"

Marriott takes a similar approach with Moxy. "The personalization of the guest room design is really critical for us," Stoeckl said. From a peg wall on one side of the guest room, he said, hangs the furniture that you might want to use — "so there's a folding chair and there is a folding table that is great to sit a laptop, paper and pencil, or a drink on."

HOT SPOTS

Hotel lobbies are drawing folks in from off the street — in some instances, leaving less room for guests. To accommodate guests hoping for a little more intimacy, Marriott's Element Hotels will launch Studio Commons later this year — a living room, dining room, and kitchen at the center of four guest rooms. "The idea is that you might be traveling with a group of friends — or say a group of consultants are on assignment," Stoeckl said, "and want to actually have your own living space that you can use together, versus having to find some quiet corner in the lobby that might not be super private."

COMMON VALUES

Surrounding these spaces to work and play are areas that encourage guest spending, like coffee shops and check-in bars. Tru's 24/7 "Eat. & Sip." market is located near the front desk where guests can pick up snacks, light meals, single-serve wine and beer, chargers, headphones, sundries, and local items, while Moxy's 24/7 pickup area for grab-and-go items is in a prominent zone located near the bar. In 2017, Hyatt Regency also launched 24/7 markets within several hotels, offering coffee, snacks, and locally curated items.

Consider the multifaceted nature of communal spaces and create a mood and atmosphere that resonates and evolves from morning to night, weekday to weekend.

"Brands like Hyatt Regency carefully consider the multifaceted nature of communal spaces and create a mood and atmosphere that resonates and evolves from morning to night, weekday to weekend," Conry said. "These experiences are valued by guests, and they can and should be revenue-generating, when possible. The most ubiquitous revenue opportunities are of course compelling food-and-beverage offerings such as bars, restaurants, coffee shops, and markets, and the focus for optimizing the value of these offerings is generally to combine them in such a way that they serve multiple functions over the course of the day."

According to Hulbert, Best Western brands Vīb and GLō, a suburban boutique hotel, function similarly. In the morning, guests might want to eat a quick breakfast, drink a cup of coffee, or meet a colleague in the common area. That same space then must be flexible enough for guests to enjoy a glass of wine in the evening. By placing banquette-height sofas around tables, guests feel as though they're in a customizable lounge area that can transition from day to night, according to Hulbert. "We really focused on figuring out how to make the space the equivalent of a round dining table in a lobby where there's always room to pull up one more. With really movable furniture and things like that, so you can always add another person, you know, if the groups expand. We keep that to be a really friendly public area environment."

Depending on the market, Best Western is also adding outside patios to their properties. Hulbert recently stayed at Best Western Premier Herald Square in New York City, which has "a great little bar with a back patio," she said. She got to the hotel late, ordered Uber Eats, and was taking it up to her room when she decided to stop at the patio bar first for a quick drink before she retired. It gave her a chance to observe how people were using the space. There were people on dates, she noticed, and others "just kind of hanging out. You could tell they were guests of the hotel, maybe coming back from their dinner out. There were a few people tucked in with their laptops, just sitting in the corner of the space. It was a really nice mix of the way people are using it," she said, "and the reasons they were using it."