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Midscale hotels boost ROI by opening up their casegoods

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As the midscale hotel sector booms, a new trend has emerged in guestroom design: Instead of traditional closets and chests of drawers, brands like Tru by Hilton, Choice's Sleep Inn and IHG's Avid are opting for open spaces with visible rods for hanging a few articles of clothing and a table to rest a small suitcase.

When Hilton was creating its Tru brand throughout 2015, the company approached FRCH Design Worldwide with what the firm's senior interior designer Meagan Barless describes as "a mountain of research" that it had conducted within the midscale market segment. The research found that there was a "psychological perception" that things hidden away were unclean. "So the brand wanted to disrupt that mindset and make everything open so that you feel all of your things are on display," Barless said. "It feels clean and you really have everything at your fingertips."

"Hotel design, in general, is becoming more streamlined and less cluttered to reinforce the sense of cleanliness that guests are demanding," said David Breeding, VP of architecture and design for the Americas at InterContinental Hotels Group. IHG announced its new midscale Avid brand in September, with streamlined guestrooms that do not have a closet or drawers. "For example, we created what we call a 'working wall,' where a central mounted beam along the back wall connects elements including a full-length mirror, a vertical lamp, a mounted TV screen, hooks for hanging items and plugs with USB ports." The guestroom's desk has also been redesigned as a ledge mounted against the wall with open space beneath for additional storage.

As it recreated its Sleep Inn prototype last year, Choice Hotels International asked guests how they interacted with their hotel spaces—for example, how did they pack and unpack their luggage? "For short stays of one or two nights, they found, guests rarely bothered putting their clothes in drawers," said Anne Smith, VP of brand management and design at Choice Hotels. With this in mind, the design team emphasized open storage spaces in the rooms—which reduces the overall building costs. "A partially open closet simplifies the look and feel of the room," she said, and guests are less likely to leave items behind when the storage is open and visible.

That was a problem Stonehill Taylor principal of design Michael Suomi had faced as a frequent traveler. “I’ve lost so many clothes by just leaving them in closets,” he said. When Suomi was designing the new Aloft Philadelphia, he custom-designed half doors on the wardrobe that let guests easily see the interiors. “The average length of stay may be the one-and-a-half days,” he said. “[Guests] value efficiency and ease of using the room and speed in terms of unpacking and repacking. And the majority of the guests are the kind who would either benefit from living out of a suitcase and not unpacking it all—and so we provide areas to open the suitcase up and live out of it—as well as a guest who likes to hang things up.” The half-doors, he said, provide guests “with an unfettered way of being able to unpack, but you have to have complete access to what the wardrobe might be for the day or two days that they’re there.”

The Owners and Operators

Open casegoods can also offer a financial benefit to hotel owners, who don’t need to spend money on purchasing, installing and ultimately replacing the furniture down the line. When Tru was first announced in early 2016, Hilton estimated that the hotels would cost an average of \$85,000 per room to build. Hilton’s Hampton Inn brand, meanwhile, with full closets, costs approximately \$110,000 per room to build.

“It definitely saves money from a fabrication standpoint,” Barless said. “It saves time as well, because fabricating doors and drawers requires more hardware and a lot more material. Keeping things simple and open allowed us more flexibility in the design, given the tighter budget restrictions.”

Open casegoods may also appeal to operators who want to speed up the cleaning process, but Barless warned that it could ultimately be “a 50/50 draw,” because the lack of closets mean that there is a greater surface area that needs cleaning.

Avid guestrooms have shelves and bedside tables on the walls that make it easier for the housekeeping team to clean the floors. “In discussions with owners, we learned that the smaller size of [the] guestrooms, elevated furniture like the bedside tables and desk, and the selection of finishes in the rooms have the potential to save housekeeping between five and 10 minutes of cleaning time per room,” Breeding said.

Going Forward

Open casegoods will likely continue to grow in the midscale sector, but don’t expect to see it in the higher tiers. “When you move up into upper-midscale and full service, you are dealing with a different traveler and a different mindset,” Barless said, adding that most guests at Tru hotels are only bringing a few changes of clothes. “When you get into the higher segments, you get a traveler who’s bringing a lot more stuff. Even business travelers are staying for longer periods of time. In that respect, you’ll see drawers and cabinets within those segments because it’s a different mindset and it’s a different travel habit.”

When Choice designed its new Sleep Inn prototype, Smith said, the design team focused on making sure that what the company expected its owners to build made sense. “We’re not asking them to overbuild or use things that go out of style,” she said. “We know what is needed and what is not.”