

Hotel Design Roundtable 2009

By Paul J. Heney

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The economy and the business of design were front of mind during HOTEL DESIGN's annual roundtable. Participants weighed in on how to source the best products for the least amount of money—everyone's million-dollar question—and discussed how the prevalence of stalled projects has made them step back and take a look at the business side of their firms. Now, more than ever, they said, design and architectural firms have to ask hard questions about a project's financing, investigate the developer's payment history and demand certain assurances. But the result is a stronger business model.

Panelists also touched on the trends of sustainable design, creativity, what's next in hotel design and how good fashion is so much more important than following the latest trends.

This year's event was held at the glamorous 162-room Hotel Viceroy in downtown Miami, which opened earlier this year. The hotel is a part of the 10-acre ICON at Brickell development, with architecture by the firm Arquitectonica and interior design by the famed Kelly Wearstler. The property's timeless Asian accents and modern flair served as a stunning backdrop to the event.



Frederic Marq
Frederic Marq Design Inc.

Jim Looney
Looney & Associates

Thom Filicia
Thom Filicia Design

Robert Polacek
Puccini Group

Todd-Avery Lenahan
ABA Design Studio

Brooke Pearsall
HVS Compass

Jennifer Root
Benjamin West



Thom Filicia
Thom Filicia Design

ON ACHIEVING A HIGH-END LOOK:

“Depending on the type of project that you’re working on . . . I think there is a greater advantage, now more than ever, to reuse as much of the existing FF&E that is available and that the most difficult part of that is having it translate from what it was to what it needs to be.”

ON LOCAL SOURCING:

“It’s about approaching each project somewhat holistically for that project and being open-minded to the idea of using local [artisans] or subcontracting things out globally, however it best suits the project—as opposed to going in with a very clear vision as to what you think must happen.”

ON THE EVOLUTION OF GREEN:

“I think the consumer is definitely looking for an authenticity of what green means and . . . there is an influx of people who are looking for hotels that are responsible and becoming more responsible. . . . I think it’s about being clear that every opportunity that makes sense is explored and is acted on. Again, it has to financially work for the business, and it has to make sense, long term. I do think green design is more important than it has ever been, and it will grow in its importance.”

ON GREEN MANUFACTURING:

“Getting the enthusiasm of your client [is important because] it’s not just the architect or the interior designer who’s promoting this, but it’s also all of the vendors who you’re working with that are also committed to it. When you [need] to take the carpeting out, they’ll come and remove it. They’ll recycle it, and you’re starting to build a great relationship for the client with the vendor, and I think that will get them excited.”

ON WHAT’S NEXT IN DESIGN:

“I think the key is authenticity. Make people feel there’s depth and there’s more to it than just splash. I think we’re looking for that across the board, not just in hotels. It’s in the automotive industry; it’s in fashion; in the food that we’re eating. We’re looking for things that are authentic and honest.”

ON GETTING MORE FOR LESS:

“This is the time when you can actually get the cheapest product and the cheapest craftsmanship because people are underselling themselves because they need to work, in every domain: in furniture, in fabrics and construction itself. So, it’s time to take advantage of it. We, as designers, have a responsibility toward our clients and we don’t want them to fail.”

ON HOW TO GET AHEAD IN DESIGN:

“Do not do one-time deals. Be humble, be honest, try to work in the long run. Don’t try to make a quick buck.”



Frederic Marq
Frederic Marq Design Inc.

ON SOURCING CREATIVELY:

“There are so many integrated people now in our business. . . . For a 455-room hotel in Miami that we’re finishing up, I got quotations from China. It was about \$1.5 million. Then I got a quotation here in America, it was about \$2.5 million. The owner of this property—it’s not a bank—I told him, can we be more creative, and he said ‘yes.’ We actually opened a mill shop on the fourth floor of the garage, we got a lot of little artisans from Miami, small contractors, small casegoods makers, and the quote that we got was \$872,000.”

ON WHEN TO GO LOCAL:

“I think [over the years] you create relationships and ties with certain individuals and you’re not going to let them go. For rugs, I have one vendor that I use, and I don’t have to worry. I call him and everything is done, all the way to the end of the project. . . . If you’re doing a hotel in India, yes, you definitely will find some good craftsmanship and probably at a beautiful price, but there are some items that you will use your source [for] because it’s headache-free, and sometimes headache-free is worth a lot of money.”



Jennifer Root
Benjamin West

ON GETTING MORE FOR YOUR MONEY:

“We heavily rely on our vendors to provide us with multiple options, and we like to get them involved as early as possible in the design process. . . . There are so many different veneers that look fairly similar to a guest, but the price range is amazing. Just tell the vendor what you need for your goal, and they will help you get there because they have the sourcing worldwide to come up with what you’re looking for, for your end look, aesthetically as well as budget.”

ON OVERSEAS SOURCING:

“If you use a local source, what will you do a year from now, two or three years from now if there’s product failure? Are they still around? We need to look at—on a long-term basis—your warranty and claim issues, to make sure you’re still going to have that product first. You know, you can maintain it for 10 to 12 years and you’ll have that reliable vendor around. . . . You really have to vet your vendors as much as possible to make sure that that product will be produced to your specifications, on time, on budget and then still be around for a couple years.”

ON GREEN RENOVATIONS:

“On the renovation end, we’re trying to recycle as much of the stuff that’s coming out of the hotel [as possible]. Recycling costs about the same as putting [things] in a landfill, so we’re trying to recycle much of our carpet pad, wall vinyl, lightbulbs, mattresses, fabrics, some of the upholstered seating—and we’re trying to do that so at least what’s coming out is not going into the landfill.”



Todd-Avery Lenahan
ABA Design Studio

ON RUNNING YOUR FIRM MORE LIKE A BUSINESS:

"We have delved into our clients' businesses in a way that we traditionally would not have. When a client approaches us now, we vet out their financials in a way that other professions do when they're engaged. General contractors certainly do. But designers, as a practice, have not their clients' financial wherewithal. ... They know our design brings value to their business, but if we establish right away that there is a creative arm and a

business development arm ... We know their business didn't become what it's become if they weren't themselves good business people. So they respect the type of questions we ask."

ON SUSTAINABILITY:

"A lot of the focus is on materiality, but there's an entire side of the process that has to do with construction, site dynamics, the way the building is assembled, and what happens to all the debris. That's something that's rarely talked about, but it's actually a much bigger part of the entire process than just materiality. Ultimately, energy consumption is a huge part of it, but the actual site dynamics are an enormous part of it that a lot of our industry really has not dug into yet."

ON LEED CERTIFICATION:

"You have to make a commitment to it, and we actually get our clients to make a commitment. We have so many who approach us with enthusiasm of wanting this LEED certification. They want the credential, and there's an education about the commitment they have to make to this because, unfortunately, right now, there is still a huge cost premium associated. So you take on a financial liability that is much greater than what you're accustomed to and they often go through sticker shock. It's amazing how many people we deal with [who] quickly become unexcited about the idea of the credential once they start penciling out the math and realize [that it involves] millions of dollars of impact."

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ON TRENDS VS. FASHION:

"We are often asked [about trends] by our clients—"where do we need to be three or four years from now?" And I always try to avoid them subscribing to trends, and I try to define the differentiation between good fashion and trend. Good fashion can endure; it's relevant, it's topical, it's timely, but it's also timeless versus trend that's very quick. The other thing that we've noticed—and that we're big proponents of—is not being quite so aspirational toward

high-end. Everybody in the past decade, in particular, has aspired to high-end. So many things are qualified as high-end. I find absolutely no shame in low-end. I think that low-end is the new high-end. There's absolutely nothing derisive or embarrassing about being modest, conservative and financially responsible. Not everything has to be about luxury, and the cliché that it's been in the hotel industry in the past couple of years. Luxury is not in materiality. Luxury is in the soulfulness of the experience and having your expectations met and being satisfied on a much deeper level."



Robert Polacek
Puccini Group

ON GETTING CREATIVE:

"When the country or the world has been down, creativity is huge. Recession requires being extremely creative at what you do, and it brings out all these artists who are overlooked sometimes because you're not looking at the artist, but at where [things] are manufactured. I think being able to bring the craft, the human being into a project is something we're looking forward to, and we'll try to bring that into our restaurants and hotels."

ON WHAT'S NEXT:

"There's less of keeping up with the Joneses and more looking inward. When users go into a hotel room, they don't ask if this chair's \$800 or \$200. It doesn't make a difference. What's more important to them is that it's comfortable. That's the luxury of it. It's the experience."

ON DESIGNERS SELECTING TECHNOLOGY:

"We think of ourselves as the user first—am I going to be frustrated first or will I understand how to use it? I think that's the biggest problem. When you go to a hotel room, you often ask, 'How do you turn this thing on? What are all these switches?'"

ON FINDING INSPIRATION:

"Always look for inspiration outside of what you're looking for ... open up an Auto Trend magazine and be inspired by a wheel for some reason. It's [about] taking the blinders off, and looking further than where you're actually looking to go."



Brooke Pearsall
HVS Compass

ON FINDING THE RIGHT PRICE POINT:

“I think we’re ending up having to do a lot more research. Research on vendors and materials because there’s often a lot of different ways to build something. And maybe you have one idea of the direction that you’re going with, but by collaborating with different manufacturers, vendors, cabinet makers—they can often bring really good ideas to the table that still help you maintain your high quality but yet can cut your price point.”

ON EDUCATING CLIENTS:

“What we’re doing right now, more than ever before, is educating, educating, educating. Talking to clients about what they’re buying, why they’re buying and why would you want to spend your money here versus over here. ... Historically, a lot of times they would just give us a number and kind of take it on faith that we would make good recommendations. Now they want to know why they’re investing in something, what’s it going to do for their property, are they going to get money back?”

ON WHERE HOTEL DESIGN IS GOING:

“I think intelligent use of space [is big]. It used to be that you had a lobby and you did this in the lobby, and there’s a business center and you did this in the business center, and there’s a fitness room and that’s what happened here. Now, the spaces are opening up and morphing together to allow more flexibility for people to use different spaces for whatever [fits] their moods. I think that’s a big trend that will continue where spaces are having multiple functions and there’s a lot of flexibility there for people.”

ON GREEN:

“As green is becoming more popular, as sustainable design is becoming more popular, there’s such an influence from nature. What’s lovely is how everyone’s not only trying to nurture themselves, but also nurture spaces, nurture each other. Everyone is wanting to get back to the basics. It’s a very interesting time in society. Everyone’s trying to take a little bit more time to care about everything.”

ON GROWING AS A DESIGNER:

“I would say experience is everything and is important. It’s okay to take that humbling position that maybe you don’t think, at first, is your dream job or exactly what you’re looking for. But every opportunity is a learning experience and you can always continue to build and build. You should be a sponge and learn as much as you can.”



Jim Looney
Looney & Associates

ON FINDING THE RIGHT PRODUCT:

“I think it takes collaboration now more than ever. I’m not a furniture maker, I’m not a purchasing

agent, I’m a designer who takes all those to achieve a solution. We can partner early, and I think that owners are letting us in on what the deals are these days. ‘This is the money I have,’ instead of saying, ‘Go design.’”

ON SOURCING LOCALLY:

“We’re doing a project in Ghana, Africa, and we want to use Ghana sources as much as we can, but we found that it’s been very limiting. We can do some artifacts or certain fabrics, or things like that, but the hardcore millwork and the hardcore construction still needs to be produced somewhere else.”

ON WHEN A PROJECT IS IN FINANCIAL TROUBLE:

“I think you have to button it up if you see that it’s really going south and possibly say to them, ‘These are the things that we can do when you get started again.’ Hopefully, you’ve ascertained whether this is a complete failure or just a bump in their financial road. So there’s a risk—how much appetite do you have for that? In one case, we did enough to get them to a point where he could get through his financial issues, he felt confident, we felt confident that it would come back, so we did just enough for him so he could reintroduce it back to financial circles. We took that risk.”

When you come across these clients who are insolvent, you may not get paid, but what you can create is a goodwill account at the end.

ON BUILDING GOODWILL:

“When you come across these clients who are insolvent, you may not get paid, but what you can create is a goodwill account at the end. A lot of times that gets out: ‘These guys, these designers are good to work with, they understand, use them.’”

ON DEVELOPING YOUR CAREER:

“Travel. Having a global view will help you because globalization and the speed of globalization is something that we all have to

come to grips with. ... This really is an incredible business. We all love what we do. We’re very, very fortunate. ... It’s about the kind of relationships we establish in this business.”



For expanded comments from our panelists, visit www.hotelworldnetwork.com/hotel-design.