

## Beyond the Desk: Innovations in Hotel Design for Hybrid Work and Leisure

By [Kathleen Dauber](#) Partner, HBA Los Angeles | October 2023



*The Ritz-Carlton Bacara, Santa Barbara lobby lounge. Photo credit: Will Pryce*

The pandemic transformed the travel industry, first shutting it down and then triggering accelerated change as the world opened back up and welcomed travelers again.

While some modifications to hotel design were temporary, like the installation of Plexiglass for health and safety measures, other shifts have made a lasting impact and are here to stay. The rise of 'work from anywhere' meant travelers could pack their suitcases and laptops and escape to far-flung destinations or sunny, warmer climates while remaining connected to the office and attending to business matters.

we are seeing design elements that cater to hybrid workers take on more leisurely characteristics throughout the hotel to meet the evolving needs of travelers and the growing number of digital nomads.

Key requirements for this are:

Comfort and convenience to establish a high-quality working environment outside of the typical office setting. Connectivity in the sense of technology and community. Peace and privacy for fostering focus and productivity when it's time to get down to business or shifting into relaxation mode when the hour calls to decompress, unwind and turn down. Experiencing cultural flavor and seeing the world while earning a living and maintaining quality of life is important to travelers, too, when choosing a hotel for the blend of business and leisure.

As hospitality designers, our work revolves around the guest experience and finding ways to enhance it. By studying how guests organically discover and engage with each space of a hotel, we then intentionally design solutions that anticipate guests' needs around the corner and at every turn. Hotel spaces and furniture that serve singular purposes are things of the past.



*Hilton Fort Lauderdale Marina Guest Room. Photo credit: Will Pryce*



*Glance Lobby Bar at JW Marriott Los Angeles L.A. LIVE. Photo credit: Don Riddle*



Kellogg Foyer at The Dagny Boston. Photo courtesy of The Dagny Boston



The Ritz-Carlton Bacara, Santa Barbara Club Lounge Terrace. Photo credit: Will Pryce

## The In-Room Workspace Gets a Modern Makeover

The remote-work phenomenon means travelers can book a destination resort, productively conduct business during the day from their quiet guest room, find inspiration outside the four walls of their room when they need a break, and enjoy the hotel's amenities or experience the local culture when it's time to close the laptop and call it a day's work.

We are designing at least one intimate area inside the guest room where a person would feel comfortable working. Furniture is selected not just for aesthetics and the visual design narrative but to fit the needs of the people who use it.

In a traditional set-up, one might find the work desk tucked away to the side of the guest room, with sleeker dimensions, a view of the outdoors and as much natural light as possible. Rather than a plain white wall, a feature accent wallcovering, artwork or wall sculpture might be strategically placed to serve as a polished backdrop for virtual meetings.

In-room work surfaces in resort hotels, and even urban hotels, are also appearing in less conventional forms yet with multi-functionality and versatility. Guests might discover the dining table or make-up vanity is designed with enough space for a laptop and to lay out a few papers, or the side table is ergonomically designed, high and large enough to pull over to the bed or chaise and work from comfortably.

Many guest rooms today, especially in renovated hotels or new builds, are equipped with televisions with casting, mirroring or streaming technology. This connectivity provides convenience for travelers not only for entertainment but also for remote workers who wish to view plans or presentations in dimensions larger than their laptop or smartphone screens can offer.

## Hotel Public Areas: A Balancing Act of Activity and Productivity

Depending on how guests choose to engage in each of a hotel's public spaces, they could nearly all function as hybrid environments for work and leisure. We've seen the traveler catching up on emails over a quick solo breakfast and coffee, the guest brainstorming with a colleague over cocktails, and even the guest taking a conference call while lounging poolside under the shade of an umbrella. The key is not to disrupt other guests who are enjoying the space for its original intent.

Flexible public space equipped with power outlets at every seating opportunity possible isn't anything revolutionary; by now, they are the norm and expected. The same goes for hotel lobbies, lounges and casual dining areas with a variety of seating groups, Wi-Fi connectivity and the feel of camaraderie.

While designing public spaces that cater to remote workers remains relatively unchanged in terms of the fit-out and elements, it is being optimized in ways that may not be immediately visible to the naked eye.

Considering spatial relationships, designers strategically create zones within each space that accommodate various guest experiences and different levels of involvement. For example, take the hotel lobby lounge. The guest looking for high energy and activity might grab a seat at the center of the bar. Guests looking to network or collaborate with co-workers on a project might place themselves in the view zone, where there are clear lines of sight within the space and opportunities to socialize in more than one direction. For the individual, work-remote traveler who wants to feel part of the scene but remain unbothered, a table toward the rear of the space or seating nestled in a niche along the perimeter would still provide the feeling of belonging with a sense of intimacy.

Are there hotel public areas that are off-limits for working remotely? Spa facilities are intended for relaxation and unplugging. Follow the rules here. Restaurants, particularly during peak meal periods, are reserved for guests who are dining. Hotel pools and fitness centers are generally not conducive environments for remote working and should only be used for leisure and exercise. However, an outdoor area adjacent to the pool deck could be utilized for working if distractions are limited, background noise is minimal, and the location is far enough away from the constant motion of other people. When in doubt, use common courtesy.

### **Quiet Corners: Maximizing Underutilized Spaces**

Both indoors and outdoors, intimate areas of respite are conscientiously designed into the landscape to provide a quiet place to relax, make a phone call, work without interruption, or recharge devices.

What were once long, empty corridors between ballrooms and meeting rooms, with the occasional seating bench, are now corridors punctuated with a series of seating groups for two, spaced out enough to provide privacy and oriented toward the view where possible.

Moveable work pods are an emerging innovation that could optimize the guest experience for the corporate business traveler, particularly those attending large-scale conventions and conferences or the remote-work traveler staying at a highly-activated hotel or resort, such as a casino hotel. Rather than having to run back to their guest room to take a private business call or go outside - where the weather could range from extreme highs to extreme lows - a guest could pop into a pod to take care of business and then return to the meeting.

These work pods are modular structures that can be installed and removed; are soundproof, fully enclosed and flexible in design; and available in a range of sizes, finishes and materials. They are a convenient solution we have seen successfully implemented in co-working spaces and open floor-plan offices to maximize space and help enhance productivity.

With today's landscape in the world of headphones, earbuds and AirPods, it can take a minute to realize a person you are approaching might be on an important phone call. Taking that call from a work pod is a different, intuitive signal to other people that you need a moment of privacy, even if you are not in a private area, without total isolation from the surrounding environment.

### **A Breath of Fresh Air and Reconnecting with Nature**

Designing for outdoor comfort has become as important as crafting the interiors. Rooftop gardens, terraces and courtyards can function as a refreshing alternative to the indoor meeting space as well as relaxing environments to inspire creativity. Landscaping or architectural screens add visual interest and a level of privacy. Versatile furnishings with ergonomic qualities and durability - that can also easily break down to be put away in storage depending on the weather - help set a comfortable scene for working remotely or casual business conversations in the great outdoors. Here, nature or a spectacular city skyline provides a scenic backdrop.

'Work from anywhere' is not just a trend because trends come and go and come back around again. Instead, it is a lifestyle adaptation and a shift in how we approach work and leisure. The pandemic not only changed the physical workplace and our perception of the 9-to-5 workday, but it was a wake-up call to remind us of the fundamental role leisure plays in maintaining our well-being and living a life worth living. Leisure is essential to our mental and physical health.

The next time you travel for business or choose a hotel for remote working, I encourage you to try working from a variety of different spaces. You may discover new inspiration or hybrid-work-friendly design elements you didn't immediately notice. And don't forget to balance work with leisure time.



*Kathleen Dauber is a partner at HBA Los Angeles. With her keen eye for quality and the details, Ms. Dauber has conceptualized, overseen and implemented countless award-winning projects in 15+ countries around the world. She has set new standards in luxury hospitality during her tenure at HBA to date, leading the design of many iconic, internationally recognized projects, including The Residences at The St. Regis Chicago; The Ritz-Carlton Bacara, Santa Barbara; Hotel del Coronado in Coronado, Calif.; Vintage House and Hotel Villagio in Yountville, Calif.; and The Castle Hotel in Dalian, China. Dauber is also dedicated to mentoring emerging designers, fostering leadership talent, and actively participating in the design community.*

Ms. Dauber