



Q&A: Denise Korn, Korn Design, Boston  
By Monica Rogers, contributing editor -- Hotels Magazine 2/1/2008

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Korn Design, Boston

Brand strategist Denise Korn, of Boston-based Korn Design, has helped shape and implement hotel brand strategies through design at more than a dozen U.S. hotels. From the Ritz-Carlton Palm Beach, to The London, NYC and the Liberty Hotel in Boston, Korn uses design to engage and guide guest experience and establish what each brand stands for.

First, a chicken and egg question: Should brand strategy fit into design, or design fit into brand strategy?

Our work as brand designers and strategists is, in a nutshell, about ensuring that the brand experience reinforces the design and vice versa. Ideally, we establish a solid brand strategy that helps inform the interior design and then build the brand design as the interiors develop. We work very closely with the interior designers and architects on all our projects; sometimes we have to accelerate the process but we never skip essential steps.

What drew you to doing brand design for hotels? What are the key differences between brand design work for hotels, and other businesses?

I have gravitated toward work in hospitality because it presents fascinating creative challenges on so many levels. From room to restaurant there are multiple opportunities to engage and guide the customer's experience and thus establish what the brand stands for. Our work is fed by careful study and understanding of human behavior, desires and comfort as they relate to each destination and environment.

Although we have a special focus on hospitality, we design brand strategies for large institutions, numerous restaurants, luxury product companies and non-profit organizations. What strings these different categories of work together is the story-telling and emotional connections that feed experiences directly tied to each brand. What makes hotels unique in this sense is our audience spends the night with us (sometimes longer) so the opportunities are richer.

What is your background?

I established my business in 1992 after studying graphic design and photography at Cornell University and Parsons School of Design and working as a graphic designer, art director and creative director in New York City. Korn Design is now in its 15th year. I manage our Boston and New York multi-disciplinary design offices with my business partner, Javier Cortés.

How would you define your style?

Thoughtful, insightful, relevant, playful and honest, I hope, always beautiful with an edge or element of surprise.

What differentiates your personal approach to hotel brand design from others in the field?

Our work is fed by careful study and understanding of human behavior, desires and comfort as they relate to each destination and environment. We want to create experiences that result in meaningful connections and memories while at the same time are delivered through impeccable service aimed at ease and convenience. We really embrace and have a solid understanding of operational concerns, both visible to the customer and behind the scenes. This enables us to design within the context of reality, in touch with the business model and bottom line while simultaneously pushing the creative envelope.

Which current big picture trends/factors are causing the most change in hotel brand design?

A craving for authenticity is at the forefront. Hotel design is becoming more of a true mix of form and function—moving away from trend and toward design that is driven by human needs, desires and comfort. This is what breeds success and loyal customers. The brand design has to complement this and incorporate elements of touch, humor and luxury that will make the travel experience memorable.

How much of a hotel's brand strategy should be conveyed by design? Please use a few of your recent hotel projects as examples.

An effective brand strategy begins with a clear understanding of market positioning and of the customer and his/her wants, needs and desires. The strategy should clearly define the experience it promises to deliver and in turn inform all design for both the physicality of the space—architecture and interiors—as well as the look and feel of the brand's complete design vocabulary.

For instance, in developing the brand experience for The Liberty Hotel, Boston, Korn Design began by creating a careful juxtaposition between the property's storied past as a jail and its re-articulation as a contemporary luxury urban hotel.

For The Charles Hotel, Boston, the unique location determined the brand positioning in an ongoing way and fed appropriate design and invention. From its shaker-inspired design and its Cambridge-based essence, now known as the "smart hotel," The Charles Hotel's brand speaks to intellectuals, power brokers, world leaders and rock stars alike.

In both cases, the design solutions, as they related to place and history, were explored with extreme care and attention to avoid cliché and to push toward inspired invention and distinctive guest experiences.

When doing brand design for a concept with multiple units, what brand design elements are deliberately consistent between properties? Which elements are deliberately different?

It very much depends on the assignment as some brands demand absolute consistency throughout the portfolio while others really want site specificity and have more of a focus on the sense of place. The London Hotels in New York City and West Hollywood represent a true bringing together of the best of each of its namesake cities, introducing a re-articulation of a truly new kind of modern cosmopolitan hotel. Our current work on The London West Hollywood is a pure evolution of the brand strategy that we developed for The London NYC. The New York City property appropriately takes on a more handsome, midtown Manhattan style than its sunnier and more casual west coast sister (The London West Hollywood is scheduled to premiere this April 2008). We achieve this through distinct color palettes, patterns and choices of materials, a muted and slightly soft photographic vocabulary for the style images tells The London stories with a consistent look—one smattered with diffused sunspots and palms, the other with the graceful edge and energy of midtown Manhattan.

How much does regional location determine how you will execute the brand image through design?

This varies greatly from project to project. In some cases, the location is a key attribute to the guest experience; in other cases it is secondary to the history of the building or an overarching brand attributes.

In articulating a hotel's brand strategy through design, how many visual elements do you touch—color scheme, building materials, flooring, fabric, lighting, furnishings, bedding, linens, uniforms, even toiletries and stationary—more? How do you sequence these things with the designers? Is there a hierarchy?

We often touch everything related to the guest amenities, guest communications and overall look and feel. As for color palette, we contribute to the client team when reviewing interior design schemes and weighing in on things like furnishings, fabrics, lighting, etc. We especially get involved with lighting as it relates to signage and/or curating art programs within the hotels.

We closely collaborate with the interior designers on all our projects. This is an essential part of our work. An effective collaboration yields a seamless and cohesive brand experience. Each of the brand touch points, including the identity and communications elements, should integrate with the interiors. Everything should work together in the most transparent way possible. Throughout the creative development process, inspiration and guidance are provided and received in both directions. The exact sequencing can vary greatly from project to project. In some cases we recommend the best designer for a project and in others the architect and interior designers are already engaged when we start. Regardless, we always work collaboratively with the entire design team to enable the brand experience to be completely integrated and never just an afterthought.

How do you determine which elements to keep neutral, and what to imbue with message? Can you use a few of your recent properties to illustrate?

We examine every single detail and aim to have everything support the overall brand experience. Sometimes it is subtle, like the choice of a luxurious material or unusual format, and other times it is more literal, applying graphic elements from the visual identity. We always aim to strike a careful balance that best supports the overall experience in ways that are delightful and refreshing, never trite or expected.

How do you strike a balance between the need to convey a consistent brand message/image with the need to make each property fresh and exciting? Can you use a few of your projects to illustrate this?

There is always an opportunity to pull from the essence of the location in order to inform the established brand. We find the appropriate opportunities to inject a project with the local flavor without diluting the brand.

How does one convey hotel brand identity through uniform design? How has this evolved in the last few years?

Uniforms are one more element that can contribute to the experience. We usually work closely with a fashion designer to make sure that the uniform design is at once appropriate and enhances the lifestyle vocabulary best suitable to the brand experience.

When elements in a hotel design are of necessity, NOT tucked under the brand umbrella—is this a blessing, or a problem in your work?

Some properties aim to include a variety of experiences, services and amenities. These are sometimes closely related to the hotel's brand positioning and often the goal is to create offerings that become destinations in themselves, while being consistent with the overall messages. For example, at The Liberty Hotel the concept we created for the lobby bar and restaurant, CLINK, is a sophisticated play on the sounds and playful jail references associated with the word CLINK—and a direct tie-in to its home within the gloriously reinvented historic Charles Street Jail.

Great Bay Restaurant in The Hotel Commonwealth, on the other hand, is clearly a stand-alone independent dining venue that is not meant to integrate with the hotel's brand at all, other than offer guests a world-class restaurant and superb roomservice menu. At The Charles Hotel, there is a bar called Noir, and a signature award-winning restaurant called Rialto. These are both stand-alone top of class experiences that also complement the hotel's positioning.

Any properties where you have had to maintain an existing brand strategy but add new design elements? How does that differ from projects where you were creating everything from scratch?

Two examples are the Hilton at Logan Airport in Boston and Jury's Hotel Boston. In both cases, the established brand standards had to be carefully considered, and a new set of guest amenities and communications materials executed in a way that retained the equity of the brand, while infusing it with a fresh perspective that was respectful of the location, the sense of place and the architectural environment.

Which current trends in hotel design do you see as the biggest detriments to effective communication of brand strategy?

The lack of authenticity and the eagerness to jump on to the latest “trends” without regard to their potential longevity or how they relate to the essence of the specific property.

Which current trends in hotel design do you see as the biggest enhancers of effective communication of brand strategy?

The desire to create refreshing new experiences and the continued evolution toward smart design that centers around function, comfort and convenience. These are the things that truly define the new luxury.

Which artists, brands, or individuals do you find most inspirational in your work?

Eva Zeisel, Bruce Mau, Balenciaga, The Eames, Bill T. Jones, The Gap all inspire me. They have all taught me in different ways to be true to the core and allow beauty and reality to co-exist.