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Focusing on Acoustics Can Improve Guests' Comfort

Posted by: Valerie Neff Newitt in Featured, Good Advice, Smart Strategy August 20, 2014

Your guests' ears never rest, not even when they're sleeping. Throughout the night, guests are likely to hear off-and-on HVAC systems, TVs in adjacent rooms, and luggage carts in hallways.

"When humans were still sleeping in caves, we needed to hear twigs snap when predators approached," explains Jeff Loether, founder of Electro-Media Design, which provides acoustical and audio visual guidance for various hotel flags in the United States and overseas. "When man moved from caves to hotel rooms, he brought his hearing acuity with him." And while hungry predators are no longer a problem, sounds that go bump in the night are.

Old hotels are apt to have the biggest sound challenges when it comes to providing rooms with true sound privacy. Rebranded hotels also struggle against an inheritance of old sound-seeping problems from original construction. "They don't build them like they used to—and that's a good thing," says Paul Battaglia, architect and professor of architectural acoustics at the University at Buffalo.

The undesirable legacy of some older properties includes insufficient sound-absorbing insulation within guestroom wall cavities. Battaglia says rebranding architects often eschew demolition and the opening of existing walls, leaving them with a sound transmission classification (STC) lower than that found in newer hotels. "They may rate at STC-40, whereas today's luxury hotels are rated at STC-54 and above," he notes.

Why does it matter? "Twenty years ago, when most hotel brands' standards for design and construction were written, rooms had 27-inch tube TVs with \$2 speakers and 1-watt amplifiers," Loether says. As manager of audio visuals and acoustics at Marriott for 10 years before starting his own consulting firm, Loether knows the audible footprint of most standard guestroom equipment. He says changing technology introduced a new level of sound bombardment. Today's rooms boast iPod-enabled clock radios with multiple amplifiers and flat-screen TVs with 100-watt stereo speakers.

The easiest way to combat the extra noise pollution, and increase a room's STC without costly demolition, is to adhere an extra layer of gypsum board to one side of a partition using viscoelastic sound-dampening adhesive, Battaglia says. "That type of adhesive is crucial. It can take a wall from STC-40 to STC-52."

Even with thicker walls, pathways through which sound escapes can defeat construction. Unsealed recessed electrical outlets are a common example. "I know a hotel with walls constructed to STC-60, but they performed at only STC-42 because the outlets weren't sealed," Battaglia says. "Yet, the 'fix' was simple. Preformed acoustic seals were installed by the maintenance crew between guests. The results were nothing short of remarkable."

Sometimes high-end design elements—marble floors, stone walls—are culprits in the battle against sound fatigue, adds Ko Kuperus, general manager of Hunter Douglas Specialty Products, Denver. Kuperus is the sound expert behind the company's patented acoustic ceiling tiles capable of absorbing 85 percent of the sounds on corridor or lobby ceilings. The tiles also can be applied on top of drywall to absorb 70 percent of wall sounds and printed on to simulate wood grain, concrete, marble, leather, or any solid color, Kuperus says. "That's unique. They bring design luxury to the ceiling—that 'fifth wall' so often overlooked by interior designers."

Loether lists one more challenge to the sound conundrum: Rooms that are simply too quiet. "Several hotel flags have ordered the 'quietest possible' HVAC systems and got exactly what they requested. Too bad. They should have asked for systems that would provide the best guest experience," he says. "Pink noise" provided by consistently whirring fans is an acoustical blessing, Loether says; it masks less desirable sounds. "If a room is too quiet, you can hear your own carotid artery pushing blood," he quips. Battaglia says that's why some hotels now install sound-consistent HVAC systems that turn on right from the reception desk at check-in and switch off only at checkout.

WORDS OF WISDOM



"Always have very detailed knowledge of the scope of work so you can plan ahead. Have the same knowledge of your customers coming in so you can manage your inventory in a way that minimizes the impact on the guest experience."

-Carmen Cruz, GM, Hotel Zephyr, on how to navigate hotel renovations

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Properties considering remodeling or new construction would be wise to address acoustics in initial planning phases. "Prevention is so much easier and cost-effective than treatment," Loether says. Meanwhile, existing lodging should investigate cost-effective fixes as described by Battaglia, as well as sound-absorbing products to keep environmental roars to a whisper.

"If all else fails, provide earplugs," Loether jokes. After all, those slumbering ears are always listening.

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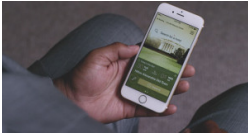
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