

NOTHING SAYS QUALITY LIKE QUIET

By Luis-Eduardo Soares

How noisy is your hotel? Is the acoustics in your guestrooms, lobby, restaurant and meeting rooms driving guests away?

Studies show that there is a correlation between health-related quality of life and the acoustic environment. Unfortunately, most of us who live and/or work in noisy environments do not realize the physiological and psychological effects of such exposure; probably because we just get used to it.



While this may be an acceptable excuse to some (depending on the industry or living environment), it is not tolerable for hotel and resort guests. In fact, noise is among the top two complaints at hotels, and it is a subject that most general managers do not like to discuss.

Noise can be described as unwanted sound (or a combination of sounds) that can adversely affect our health, both in the short and long term. Regardless of level, noise exposure consequences range from relatively minor but still harmful concerns (e.g. communication/speech interference, disrupted sleep patterns, and reduced efficiency) to irreversible hearing loss. Since humans perceive and experience noise differently, noise sensitivity (in both physiological and psychological terms) and tolerance levels (for different noise types) vary significantly among individuals.

Consider this scenario.

You decide to take a break from the hectic and noisy environment and book a room for the weekend. You search online and find this impressive, new resort and spa conveniently located just off the highway and only a few miles from the airport you are flying into. This is it – three days of peace and quiet... or so you hope.

After dealing with the typical travel stress, you arrive at your weekend destination. The resort buildings are even more impressive than the online pictures, but from the moment you step out of your car, you start to wonder about the proximity to the highway. Between road noise and the loud music being piped in at the porte-cochère, you wonder when peace and quiet will become reality.

As you enter the hotel, you cannot help but notice the remarkable 20-story atrium lobby, entirely clad with Carrara marble. Unfortunately, these beautiful finishes cause background noise to linger and become distracting. Reverberation is so bad it should be measured in "*furlongs per fortnight*" instead of seconds. Your first impression of this hotel quickly transports you from standing in a tranquil oasis to standing in the middle of Waterloo Station in London, or Gare-du-Nord in Paris, on a late Friday afternoon.

By the time you approach the front desk staff to check in, you feel confused – your visual and aural experiences simply do not match.

Arriving at your room, two things immediately become evident: 1) the floor looks like hardwood, but it is really a plastic knock-off which creates self-noise and makes your room "sound loud", and 2) there is a distinct and distracting sound of high-heels coming from room above. Rather than being relaxed now that you finally arrived in your room, your stress level begins to rise.

You head to the shower before going to diner, but unfortunately your neighbors had the same idea. You can clearly hear all the typical plumbing noises and the discussions about attire for the evening. To be immune to the noise, you immerse yourself in the conversation.

Now it's time for dinner. You follow the directions on the elevator and arrive at your restaurant of choice for the evening. As you peruse the menu, you cannot help but look around and appreciate the clean architecture and exquisite décor. You think about the effort put in the design to achieve such visual impression. As you attempt to enjoy the nice dish the server places in front of you, the loud environment takes over and you start to wonder about the failed design attempt.

You head back to your room thinking about the "nightclub-like experience" you just had during dinner and convince yourself that a good night sleep is all it takes to put you back in a good mood in the morning. You set the thermostat to your liking and realize how quiet the HVAC system is. As you turn off the lights, you suddenly think you acquired Superman's hearing capabilities – you can hear everything... I mean everything, including the loud and constant banging against the demising wall behind your headboard, water running above the drop ceiling, ESPN coverage of Swedish curling championships from the room across the corridor, a toilet flushing below, the ice machine dropping cubes down the hall (as if wishing you "ice dreams"), a toilet flushing below, airplanes taking off from the conveniently located airport, and everything else in between.



After taking a double-dose of sleep-aid pills, you finally fall asleep. Your unsolicited wake-up call at 5 a.m. has several distinct sounds coming from the loading dock, including a garbage truck, a fork lift, diesel engines, and pallets being dragged and/or dropped. After all, you asked for a room facing the mountain, right?

After skipping breakfast, you take a book to the pool with very little hope to get 15 minutes of peace and quiet. Good news: kids in the pool prove you are not wrong.

You decide to check out and cut your "relaxing time" short. At least the airport is nearby.

So, what is the lesson to be learned? It doesn't matter how beautiful a facility is or how good of intentions the designer and management had when selecting the finishings. Unless acoustics is taken into consideration during the early design phase, the loveliest of facilities can end up being the ugliest of stays.

For the hotel aforementioned, engaging an acoustics professional at the onset of the design process would have been a wise investment.

About Luis-Eduardo Soares

Luis-Eduardo Soares is the Principal Consultant specializing in the area of Building Acoustics for Electro-Media Design Ltd., an AudioVisual systems design and Acoustical consultation group with expertise in audio, video, control, and related presentation, entertainment, and communications technologies. The practice also includes AudioVisual Operational and Management consulting to address the entire AV systems lifecycle. As independent consultants over the last 25 years, EMD has provided consulting services for more than 800 projects globally, including: hotels, conference and convention centers, spas and resorts, government facilities, corporate board rooms, theaters and auditoria, schools and electronic classrooms, training and meeting rooms, courtrooms, places of worship, restaurants and nightclubs, sports facilities and venues, and command and control centers.