

Whether you're visiting a hotel across the world or just across the country, you expect to experience a taste of your destination's culture. After all, why trudge through airport security and sit on a plane for hours just to stay in a hotel that looks exactly like the last one?

To give hospitality venues an edge in a competitive market, designers are now incorporating local elements into everything from hotels to restaurants to spas, helping to showcase a location's unique materials, cultures and traditions, and providing visitors with a memorable, flavorful experience.

"You go to a space or an area of the world, and you've gone for a purpose," says Alison Andrus, senior interior designer with HKS Hill Glazier Studio. "Our goal is to design spaces that bring local people, the environment, the taste, and the smell—everything about that place—into the venue, so that when a person is experiencing the venue, they're experiencing where they are. It's the ability to create an experience for a guest that is a complete wash-over of that culture."

This approach helped HKS Hill Glazier Studio to create authentic spaces within the Secrets Maroma Resort in Playa Maroma, Mexico. The design team brought in work from area artists, while local manufacturers provided custom furniture for the resort. "Using that as a thread all the way through the project, from beginning to end, it allowed a complete submersion of the guests into a culture, just by using elements of that culture," says Andrus.

The thoughtful use of colors representative of a given locale can likewise immerse guests in a new world. For example, when tasked with renovating the Marmara Taksim hotel in Istanbul, Turkey, designers with Wilson Associates made extensive use of red—the color of the Turkish flag—while incorporating blue glazed pendent fixtures, fashioned after the millions of indigo and yellow evil eyes that have become the icons of Istanbul, and are thought to provide good fortune when grouped together. (Read the full story at www.interiorsandsources.com.)

And while incorporating regional furniture, art or color can give an otherwise location-neutral space a jolt of local flavor, the possibilities abound for leveraging cultural signposts into a design. "We incorporate local elements in many forms, such as

FULL Immersion

Hospitality designers begin thinking (and buying) local to give visitors a true taste of a destination's culture.



architectural details, carpets, textiles and lighting," says Drew LeClair, senior associate with international design firm DiLeonardo.

LeClair explains how the firm merged traditional Indian architecture with modern hospitality in its design for the Westin in Kolkata. "In the center of the lobby, we used a feature flooring pattern used in many private residences called 'Brahmasthan,' a unique feature of ancient architecture based on Vastu Shastra. Brahmasthan is referred to as 'the heart of the house.' It is the central, holiest and most powerful zone of the house. All directions meet at the center of the house and disperse positive energy in all directions. This positive energy is very useful for living beings of the occupants of the house. The Brahmasthan should always be left open and free of obstructing objects, so there are no beams, columns or furniture impeding on the feature."

DiLeonardo's appropriation of the Brahmasthan concept also highlights the importance of in-depth

research when incorporating cultural designs into a space. These items can have a range of socially significant meanings not immediately understood by outsiders, and can result in a less-than-desirable situation when adapted incorrectly. In addition, thorough research ensures that only traditional, iconic elements of a culture—as opposed to the clichés—are used in a design.

Some spaces simply rely on nature's gifts to create an immersive experience; accentuating prominent environmental elements of a place can allow visitors to focus on the natural beauty of an area and help them to appreciate the journey.

"Not only does incorporating elements of a place within a design show respect to the environment and the local people, it is an opportunity for the design to be a continuation of the space and not

● **ABOVE** A spa at the Secrets Maroma Resort incorporates local flora, textiles and furnishings to provide an immersive experience for guests.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SECRETS MAROMA RESORT



a total departure,” says Andrus. “Imagine this beautiful arrival sequence at a hotel lodge: you’re driving up and have this timber and beauty and you go in feeling very authentic. Then you walk in and they’ve designed this beautiful glass wall along the back, so you get to go outside and completely engage with the outdoors. There’s no boundary between the indoors and out.”

The immersion concept extends beyond specific places or cultures, however; designers are frequently asked to transport visitors to a previous era altogether, and create spaces that evoke their own memories and emotions of the time. Andrus was tasked with this when she worked on the Jersey Boys Theatre in Las Vegas, Nev.

“The Jersey Boys bring back memories to people—they were driving in their car when they first heard a song, or they remember watching them on TV,” she explains. “Designing a space was just as much about the era and what they were doing at the time as it was the Jersey Boys themselves. What were the patterns, what were the colors, what was that feeling that we wanted people to feel the second they walked in? We wanted them to feel like they were there and these were the real Jersey Boys. We treated the environment to make it feel like it was from that time—bringing in a little bit of whimsy, records, lights, and different emotional sensory things were really important in that design.”

It is also important to maintain the modernity of a space by giving historic and cultural elements a more contemporary interpretation. You want visitors to feel as if they’re truly experiencing another place or time, while delicately balancing that with the desires of the current culture and its inhabitants. “We approach the use of local elements in figurative and artful ways, not literal ways,” LeClair says.

This can mean abstractly incorporating a local mountain range or oceanfront into the space, or interpreting local colors, patterns and elements into a totally new design. Designers of the Marmara Taksim hotel took the weave of the traditional kaftan, and used it as inspiration for the lines and patterns of the hotel.

“It’s essential to create a design focus that is true and iconic and makes the people proud, and not try to alter what’s already there,” Andrus says. “Just bring it out for people to experience.” 

● **ABOVE** The Westin Kolkata’s lobby features a Brahmadhan flooring pattern and a chandelier that incorporates the design and colors of the flower garlands seen in the streets of the city.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DILEONARDO

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