

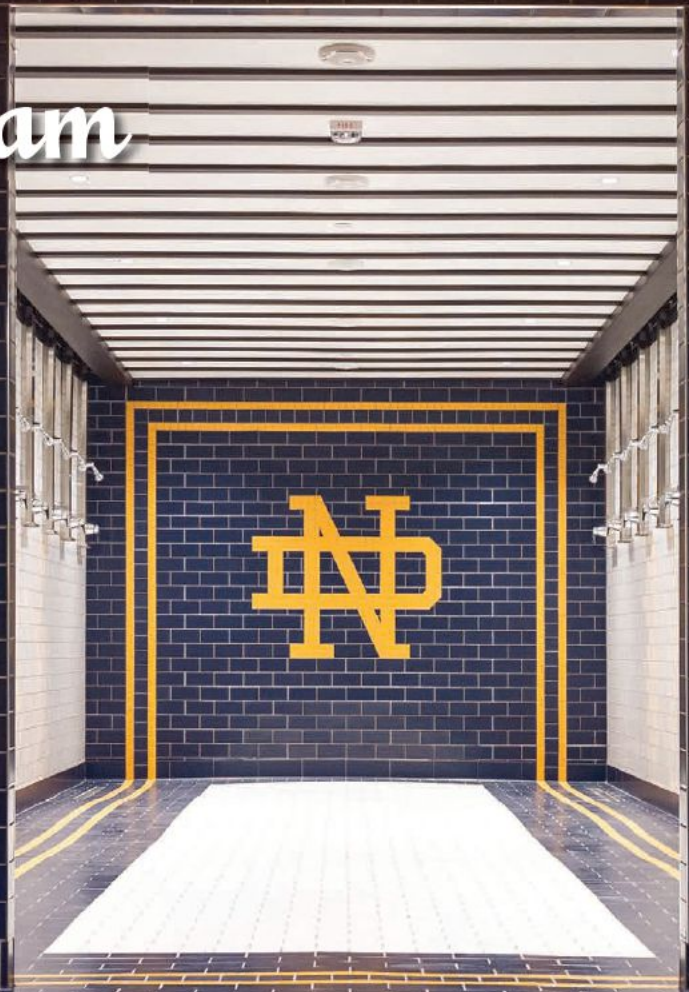
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* **TREND ALERT:**
localization
in design

LOCAL FLAVOR

BUILDINGS ARE STARTING TO LOOK MORE LIKE THE COMMUNITIES IN WHICH THEY'RE LOCATED. HERE'S WHY THAT'S SIGNIFICANT.



IN THE DESIGN OF ITS SACRAMENTO, CALIF., OFFICE, DPR CONSTRUCTION LOOKED TO SACRAMENTO'S MONIKER "CITY OF TREES", WHICH LED TO AN INNOVATIVE USE OF WOOD THAT RESULTED IN A CHANGE IN THE BUILDING CODE.

Not long ago, you could walk into a major hotel or restaurant chain anywhere around the world and you wouldn't know if you were in New York or New Delhi. Consistency in the look and feel of properties was considered essential to a successful brand strategy—and it worked for a while.



PHOTOS: CHAD DAVIES

“There was a time in the ‘80s and ‘90s when larger hotel brands felt having a homogenous product gave the consumer a sense of security, and this established expectation worked in favor of the larger branded properties,” explains Giana DiLeonardo, partner at design firm DiLeonardo International, Providence, R.I.

Marriott is a great example of a hotel brand that embodied this cookie-cutter approach, according to Barbara Parker, owner of Parker-Torres Design Inc., Sudbury, Mass. “The original sort of homogenization of the design aesthetic was because Mr. Marriott felt like you should feel at home and it should feel familiar no matter where you were. That’s why all their hotels looked the same.”

DiLeonardo notes hotel guests today rely more on the level of service for the consistency they expect, which gives design “the freedom to celebrate the unique and exceptional qualities of a certain place.” The change in the hospitality industry happened in large part because of

the disruption of the market by the boutique hotel trend of the 2000s, she says, as well as the further segmenting of the market. In the case of Marriott, its merger with Starwood in 2018 signaled the shift in its approach to become more design-oriented.

This trend favoring local geographic and cultural influences in place of standardization is happening in the design of not only hotels and restaurants, but also corporate offices and retail locations. It’s not that corporate branding is being done away with—far from it. Rather, organizations are repositioning their properties to create destinations where people want to spend their time, strengthening the brand by forging stronger connections with their communities.

What else is behind the localization trend? How can design professionals and building owners ensure their properties thoughtfully reflect local influences? And why is it important? For the answers to these and other questions, read on.

Social Media, Expectations Are Driving Change

As noted earlier, the hospitality industry began moving toward more localized design in response to market segmentation and the success of smaller, boutique hotels entering the market. Across the board, however, people today are looking for authentic experiences, DiLeonardo remarks, and they want to share them through social media channels.

“Travelers today are exposed visually to so much through social media, and the expectations of unique moments and new discoveries has been elevated,” she says. “Online reviews and ‘Instagrammable’ moments can drive revenue, and this is where designers play a key role on the return of investment.”

Parker agrees and notes when people travel to a place they want to experience the destination they’re in and share it with others. “I don’t want to be in a Boston-area hotel that feels like it could



ULTIMATELY, BUILDINGS AND INTERIORS THAT REFLECT THE COMMUNITIES THEY ARE IN ARE A WIN-WIN BECAUSE THEY HELP INSTILL A SENSE OF LOCAL PRIDE. SUCH IS THE CASE FOR THE DENVER MARRIOTT TECH CENTER, DESIGNED BY PARKER-TORRES DESIGN INC.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF PARKER-TORRES DESIGN

be anywhere in the world,” she explains. “When guests are traveling, they want to post their special event or the highlight of their trip, and they want to have that fabulous backdrop that lets everyone in the world know ‘I’m here in Phoenix.’”

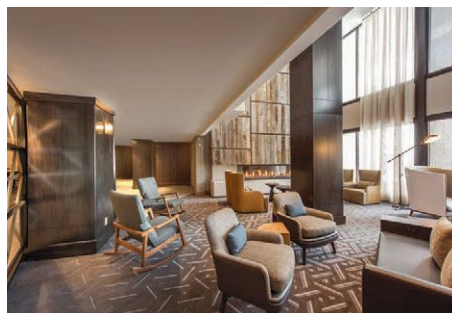
Bryan Kent, business unit leader for national contractor DPR Construction, adds people’s expectations have changed and younger travelers, in particular, are looking for intriguing destinations. “That’s what people want. They’re looking to go stay somewhere hip and cool,” he says.

Beyond the cool factor, Kent adds many hotel properties and offices alike are seeking to separate themselves from the competition and provide spaces that differentiate them from the business down the street—whether it’s to spend a night or sign a long-term lease in an office building.

“From a branding perspective, many companies are using this as an opportunity to do something that isn’t really expensive, makes their product stand out and tells a story more than, ‘It’s just another office building or just some other hotel room,’” he states. “[Localization] makes it feel different, and that story is what gets spread around.”

Research, Authenticity Are Key

Creating a genuine sense of place isn’t as



straightforward as it sounds because to reflect a culture accurately and respectfully, you need to understand it—and that requires doing some homework early on.

“Research is key to this process and understanding a place can not only be skin deep,” DiLeonardo points out. “While finishes and color palettes might reflect one element of a place, a designer can further explore in the organization of a plan or a local industry.”

Case in point: for a hotel project in the seaport community of Mystic, Conn., the obvious approach would have been creating a maritime theme with nautical references and colors. But as the design team at DiLeonardo International dug deeper, they discovered the harbor was developed in response to local farming communities and manufacturing. “From here, planning and materiality referenced the way in which early settlers used dry stacked stone walls and early furniture manufacturing details,” DiLeonardo recalls. “The results are an unexpected and thoughtful renovation that has guests feeling a part of the culture of Mystic in an authentic and subtle way.”

Parker adds cultural differences require designers to do their due diligence. As a firm based in the Boston area working on a project in Thailand, for example, research is



THE CONCEPT FOR THIS METAL SCULPTURE IS INSPIRED BY THE IDEA OF TURNING ONE'S SPIRIT TO THE SUN FOR WARMTH AND COMFORT. AS GUESTS ENTER THE LOBBY OF THE PHOENICIAN RESORT, PHOENIX, THIS FIGURATIVE PIECE GREETES THEM WITH THE UPLIFTING AND INSPIRING FEELING OF SURRENDER TO THE WARMTH AND BEAUTY OF THE LANDSCAPE AND ALL THAT THE PHOENICIAN RESORT HAS TO OFFER.

ARTIST: Lee Seong-gu

PHOTOS: GARRETT ROWLAND PHOTOGRAPHY



PHOTOS: ISAAC MAISELMAN

THE DESIGN INSPIRATION FOR THE RENAISSANCE TOLEDO DOWNTOWN HOTEL DRAWS FROM THE REGIONAL HISTORY OF TOLEDO, OHIO, KNOWN AS "THE GLASS CITY" BECAUSE OF THE LEGACY THE GLASS INDUSTRY LEFT IN THE REGION. AS SUCH, THERE WAS A STRONG FOCUS BY THE DILEONARDO INTERNATIONAL TEAM TO INCORPORATE GLASS AND ITS NATURAL PROPERTIES IN THE DESIGN DNA.

crucial to understanding the local culture and creating designs that look authentic and are respectful of the community and its values. "The colors and symbols mean completely different things here than they do there, so you need to be careful," she warns. Likewise, she says it's important to pay attention to the indigenous design of an area, such as in the Southwest where the Native American culture is prominent. "You want to make sure you're working with and referencing the right cultural sources." However, the Internet has made access to information more readily

available, so "it's much easier to do it today than it was 25 years ago," she adds.

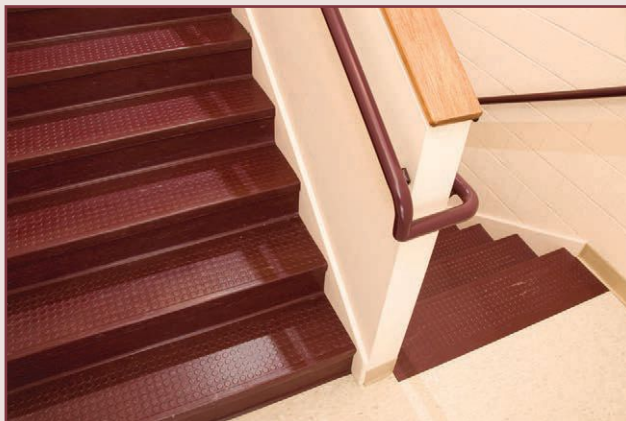
Local culture isn't always external, either. In the design of its Sacramento, Calif., office, DPR Construction turned the process inward and scheduled a full-day city tour with a diverse group of employees to take in the sights and local influences. The team visited a railroad museum, nearby rivers, local coffee shops and restaurants, public art installations and other historic renovations taking place in the city to determine how they could incorporate these elements thoughtfully into the design of their work-

place—a process that was key to its success, according to Marshall Andrews, project manager at DPR's Sacramento office.

"If you just get caught up in what you think localization should be and operate in a silo, it's not going to be as successful," Andrews observes. "Going through that full-day experience with others and all of us really learning something different added quite a bit of value I don't think would have been incorporated into the project otherwise."

The danger with the localization design trend is going too far and

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LIFE IMITATES ART

Perhaps one of the most obvious and effective ways to incorporate local flavor into a building project is to work with local artists whose work can be a powerful reflection of the community. Further, bringing artists into the design process early on can result in novel approaches that wouldn't be considered otherwise.

"Design teams can bring local craftspeople and artists in the fold as soon as possible to collaborate, share ideas and develop the design together," says Giana DiLeonardo, partner at design firm DiLeonardo International, Providence, R.I. "Oftentimes, their knowledge of process and material is invaluable and can lead to unique solutions that are surprisingly cost-effective and high-impact."

Barbara Parker, owner of Parker-Torres Design Inc., Sudbury, Mass., says her team typi-



cally brings on an art consultant early in the design process for a project and partners with local artists who "have a feeling for the color, the patterning and the graphic design of the area."

For example, in the recently completed San Antonio River Center Marriott, the general manager had recommended a

local glassmaker to the Parker-Torres Design team, who commissioned the artist to complete a blown-glass art installation behind the front desk in the lobby. "That really brought local flavor in and anyone who comes into the hotel will be like, 'Oh my God, that's so-and-so's glass,'" Parker states.

Likewise, DPR Construction saw an opportunity to add local art into the front entrance of its Austin, Texas, office. The team had local artists build a set of ornate, decorative wood doors that draw the attention of guests but also serve as a nod to the local community, which features many of these bespoke doors.

Noting the popularity of murals in the city, an employee at DPR Construction painted an entire wall in the office inspired by a mural in a local coffee shop where someone spray



Painted "I love you so much." The office mural adapts the phrase to read, "I love to build so much."

"She took the idea from the coffee shop on the wall and made it more about us, but at the same time it's an iconic Austin thing that people know and see," explains Bryan Kent, business unit leader for DPR Construction, based in the Austin office. "So, when you walk in, you immediately are able to attach those two things together."

PHOTOS: PETER MOLICK

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“ IF YOU JUST GET CAUGHT UP IN WHAT YOU THINK LOCALIZATION SHOULD BE AND OPERATE IN A SILO, IT’S NOT GOING TO BE AS SUCCESSFUL. —Marshall Andrews, project manager, DPR Construction ”

overcompensating by overloading a space with local cues. “It needs to feel natural. It can’t be forced,” Kent states. “I can see where you could go and do too much and then it’s going to feel kind of quirky and awkward.”

The Importance of Materials

Historically, buildings reflected their locale by the raw materials they were constructed with because they were sourced nearby. Today, using local materials in thoughtful ways can not only reflect the region, but also may result in innovative solutions.

“Materiality is important on many levels. It can be the best environmental and economic choice but it should go beyond detailing and craftsmanship and should reflect why a material was chosen,” DiLeonardo says. “In some cases, this could mean taking a traditional material and using it in a completely new and innovative way

or vice versa—using a new material in a traditional detail.”

For example, the design inspiration for the Renaissance Toledo Downtown Hotel draws from the regional history of Toledo, Ohio, known as “The Glass City” because of the legacy the glass industry left in the region. As such, there was a strong focus by the DiLeonardo International team to incorporate glass and its natural properties in the design DNA. Exploring the dynamic opportunities of glass material, each space reflects the energy of the city beyond transparency and results in unexpected, yet intriguing design elements.

Similarly, DPR Construction looked to Sacramento’s moniker “City of Trees” for inspiration for its new offices, which led to an innovative use of wood that resulted in a change in the building code. Andrews recalls the team’s decision to construct a

6,000-square-foot expansion entirely out of cross-laminated timber: “With Sacramento’s moniker being the ‘City of Trees,’ we really thought this structured-type wood would be quite reflective of that, so we decided to go down that route. But our decision to pursue the option of the new structure being made entirely out of wood wasn’t adopted by building code.”

After meetings with the city’s structural engineers and submitting calculations for structural loads and shear, the DPR team managed to get their design (and local thematic element) approved. “It’s the first [project] in Sacramento to have this mass timber in a sheer wall application and the first time this product has been used for a sheer wall in the state of California, which is a pretty big deal if you consider the earthquake and seismic requirements,” he recalls.

Parker remarks, whenever possible, her firm will source stone materials from local quarries or purchase products and artifacts from nearby stores and antique shops that reflect the region. However, with larger properties, sourcing locally isn’t always possible, but it doesn’t need to be a deterrent if approached thoughtfully.

“Doing hotel work, because we’re working in large quantities, it’s often the case we’re not sourcing any of the major elements locally,” Parker remarks. “But we have to take care to make sure it looks like it’s sourced locally.” For instance, in specifying rough-hewn, weathered wood planking for projects in Denver and Calgary, Alberta, Canada, Parker says neither project featured locally sourced wood. “They were sourced from someplace else, but they looked appropriate for the location.”

Ultimately, buildings and interiors that reflect the communities they are in are a win-win because they help instill a sense of local pride.

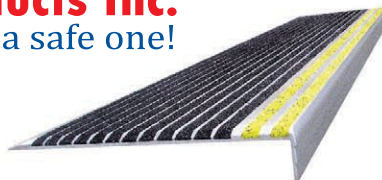
“We work with small companies, as well as large companies, and certainly the smaller owners are very proud of the properties they own and they want that reflected through the design,” Parker notes. “We really feel if you do it thoughtfully and well, then it’s very successful.”



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