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A Sociable Conference

The New Hotel Meeting Room Is a Place to Lounge



MARILYNN K. YEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

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By JULIE WEED

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As the line between office and social life continues to fade, with more people checking e-mail after dinner or texting friends between business meetings, hotels are taking the cue in redesigning their meeting rooms.

Multiple chains are transforming some of their traditional and somewhat antiseptic meeting rooms into more comfortable lounges aimed at encouraging people to mingle and ideas to flow.

Not long ago, conferences were used to communicate important information that could not be easily acquired otherwise. "Now, attendees can get most of the meeting's content via Web site, simulcast or videos posted online," said Stephani Robson, a senior lecturer at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration. "So the face-to-face networking that happens on-site can be the most important aspect of the gathering."

As a result, hotels are remaking their meeting rooms into more social spaces and places for impromptu connections and small gatherings, said Dr. Robson, who studies how hotel design influences guests' perceptions and behaviors.

At Fairmont Hotels and Resorts, hotels "have been moving away from standard, dull meeting rooms," said Mark Sergot, vice president of global sales at Fairmont, and making them "comfortably loungelike so attendees can relax, get work done, or both."

Newly renovated meeting rooms at the Westin New York at Times Square include shelves of books and decorative objects, and the common area is set up with conversational seating areas and a permanent central bar and food service area, rather than space for temporary food stations. "The total effect is more residential and relaxed," said the general manager, Terry Lewis. He contrasted it with "the typical meeting area layout of a long hallway, with very little décor and no seating."

At the recently renovated Grand Hyatt New York, a new meeting room called Gallery on Lex offers wood and stone floors, leather furniture, richly colored striped carpets, a long high-top communal table and stone counters so attendees can "socialize and interact with the hotel's culinary team."

A \$40 million renovation at the Hilton McLean Tysons Corner in Virginia aims for "a mix of formal and casual multipurpose spaces that transcend the traditional meeting or conference rooms" said Andrew Flack, vice president, global

brand marketing, Hilton Hotels and Resorts, so meeting attendees can gather and casually exchange ideas. The JW Marriott Grand Rapids in Michigan offers traditional meeting spaces, but demand has been rising for its small Mixology lounge off the lobby, said Jennifer Shaler, director of sales for the hotel.

John Zagula, managing director for Ignition Capital Partners in Seattle, said he traveled every month, mostly around the United States and Asia, and had noticed the new meeting room designs. He said it reflected his own work environment. "We don't have the same formal-looking offices with the desk and chair and filing cabinet like we used to," he said. "My office now is a more casual space with an armchair, where I can read or people can stop to chat or brainstorm."

Participants at conferences expect to be comfortable, even if they are in for-

Business meetings are becoming more focused on building social ties.

mal meetings listening to speakers, Dr. Robson said. At a recent Hospitality Design Expo in Las Vegas, she said, she saw new chair designs that included storage under the seat for laptops and briefcases, as well as chairs that were padded and could swivel or tip back, to replace stackable plastic ones.

Dr. Robson noted that hotels were quickly adopting the new design elements. With so much more information available on the Internet, she said, from hotels sharing their plans to customers posting pictures and reviews, "It is easy to see what the competition is doing and adopt their best ideas."

Convention centers are rethinking their spaces as well. Megan Rodriguez, a spokeswoman for the Long Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau in California, said part of its recent \$35 million upgrade was inspired by the TED ideas conferences. The new design offers meeting attendees the opportunity, she said, "to collaborate and foster a deeper connection with their community," she said, "via pod seating areas and mini meeting spots." Rather than an efficient-feeling space to get things done and go home, she said, the convention center

aimed for a "warm, stylish and welcoming guest social experience."

The new spaces often come equipped with new technical capabilities. Dr. Robson said the increase in simulcasting and filming sessions for the Web required better acoustics, better lighting and quieter cooling and heating systems to improve the quality of the presentation for remote viewers. She also said a roomful of conference-goers — all potentially using laptops and smartphones — required a robust Wi-Fi system.

The recently opened meeting spaces at the Grand Hyatt San Francisco include LCD televisions that retract from the ceiling and state-of-the-art audiovisual technology to accommodate remote participants. Touch-screen LCD reader boards in the hallways show guests where their meetings are and how to get there. The property aims to be "the most versatile, tech-forward choice for meetings and events in San Francisco," said David Nadelman, general manager.

Meeting spaces are also being designed to be more flexible so they can quickly transform from board meeting to festive event. The new conference center at the Fairmont Scottsdale Princess, scheduled to open in October, will offer spaces with walls that open up to the outdoors for a "refreshing open-air meeting or evening banquet, making the venue feel more like a lounge than a traditional meeting space," Mr. Sergot said.

Dr. Robson said the more flexible spaces allowed hotels to respond more quickly to customer requests, increase revenue per square foot and reduce construction costs. "Building one multifunctional room is better than two specialized ones," she said.

The reimagined meeting rooms are also showing up overseas. The FG Royal hotel in Riga, Latvia, advertises its Library room with leather sofas, wood paneling, bookshelves and a fireplace for corporate meetings. The Web site for the W Hotel in Barcelona, Spain, encourages guests to "leave mild-mannered meetings behind" and offers a "sensory setup" with music and special scents as well as "state-of-the-art bells and whistles to create audiovisual spectacles."

Of course, it should be noted that the reason the traditional boardroom design has been around so long is that it works. "Mostly, you still need your standard long table to sit around," Mr. Zagula said. "It's too hard to have a teleconference or take notes when people are scattered about in stuffed armchairs."