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The Value of Storytelling

Maria Vafiadis | 30 July 2021



Sheraton Park Lane ballroom - Will Pryce

Human beings have been engaged with storytelling for millennia. Whether they are visual, verbal or written, we are hard-wired to give and receive stories. Today, it seems, all successful brands need to tell a story and, when done well, their narratives have a powerful effect on consumers – they elicit an emotional response, create memories and generate loyalty. Arguably in the aftermath of the pandemic, this will be more important than ever before for hotels, especially those in urban centres where the potential of over-supply will demand greater differentiation. Competing on rates alone will not give operators an edge forever whereas a great story just might. In fact, if the story aligns with the desires and values of potential guests in a heartfelt way, they will probably be prepared to pay more for the experience.

In truth, many of the great hotels of the world have successfully woven stories around themselves for a long time, although their narratives were perhaps more to do with their legendary guests than with a strategy for storytelling. In more recent times, there has been an exciting emergence of stories to do with community and belonging for a whole range of people who neither wish to, nor can afford to, stay in the grande dames. Proof, I suggest, that there are

stories for everyone, so long as they are genuine and touch everything the guest experiences from the first look at the hotel website to the recollections they take home.

As a hotel designer, I am of course mainly concerned with telling stories through the physical environment. The narratives that are the framework for my work may draw on the location and its history and culture or they may be inspired by the heritage of the building or might purely be a celebration of the natural world surrounding the property. The important thing is that they accord with the hotel brand and are interpreted in a thoughtful way. Whatever the interior narrative, it needs to be at one with everything else that the guest encounters, from marketing messages to service and cuisine. The narrative must feel natural, rather than imposed or overly themed.

Our most current example of narrative creation is for a new hotel on the island of Syros in the Aegean Sea. This is an island for those 'in the know' and while the French and Scandinavians do holiday on Syros, there are still more locals and mainland Greeks than international travellers during the summer months. The joy of a project in a lesser-known location is that we are not constrained by conventional expectations of a certain visual or sensory experience and we are more empowered to freewheel in constructing the narrative.

It was in the first half of the 19th Century that fired our imagination, a time when the island gained a new dynamic as a commercial and cultural centre and Ermoupoli, now the island's capital, was established. Affluent Greek traders, bankers and industrialists built mansions richly decorated by Venetian artists, and Ermoupoli became truly cosmopolitan. The town also rapidly emerged as the leading port in Greece and it was with this thought in mind that our story for the new boutique Shipyard Hotel was born. The hotel is to be housed in a neoclassical building in Ermoupoli's trading district of Vaporia (the Greek word for ship). It might have been obvious to take our design cues from the heritage building but we are in fact drawing much of our inspiration from the Neorion shipyard which is located nearby. In this way, we will create a hotel that is different for Syros. It will juxtapose the classical with the industrial, celebrating the ship making and nautical traditions of the island, and while accommodated in a heritage building, it will feel very modern.

By contrast, several years ago we were invited to refurbish The Sheraton Park Lane in readiness for its new chapter as a Sheraton Grand hotel. One of London's finest Art Deco properties, it had a glamorous history with exquisite function spaces where socialites and the aristocracy of the 20th Century had once gathered. It was this story that we chose to retell through our work. Some areas were subject to a light touch restoration, others were entirely stripped back, the ground floor was re-modelled and new wining and dining spaces opened-up the hotel to the busy thoroughfare of Piccadilly which the property overlooks. Yet, whatever the degree of intervention, the hotel's unique

inheritance is now layered into the guest experience in a coherent way throughout the hotel and the spirit of The Sheraton Grand Park Lane is as apparent in the new guestrooms as it is in the heritage ballroom.

According to best-selling author, Philip Pullman: "After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world."

Hotels are in a fortunate place – they can supply all four.

Maria Vafiadis, Founder & Managing Director of MKV Design, is part of Hospitality Insights' Inner Circle, a group of industry leaders and innovators we have brought together to help us contribute to debate in the sector.

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