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Q&A: MKV's Maria Vafiadis on luxury hospitality, wellbeing and design trends

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Hospitality Insights: As a designer in luxury hospitality, what do you see as the trends that will have the most profound impact on hospitality investment in the coming years?

Maria Vafiadis: There are two trends that have steadily gained traction over recent years, and these are human wellbeing and environmental preservation. For a while, these were seen as a contradiction in terms in [luxury hospitality](#), but now I think the opposite is true. Government regulation, the apparent marketability of eco-destinations, consumer demand and evidence that guests will pay a premium for experiences that prioritise both their wellbeing and environmental impacts are coming together in a union which will have a profound impact on hospitality investment. We are seeing a new, more thoughtful attitude to what luxury means together with a growing desire for harmony with nature. All of us who develop and design hotels and resorts now have an opportunity to respond to this.

Hospitality Insights: The pandemic has shone a new light on the importance of wellbeing in hospitality: what does it mean in terms of development, design and operations?

Vafiadis: Our sense of wellbeing is about our core as human beings, mind, body and soul, and, as the pandemic has reminded us, wellbeing has a great deal to do with our connection to the natural world. For decades, people travelled to find this engagement but the side-effect was often irreparable damage to the very ecologies and communities they sought to experience. We were reaching a tipping point before Covid struck. Hopefully hitting the pause button over the last year or so will prove to be the enabler in helping us understand that wellbeing in hospitality is to do with every aspect of development, design and operations.

Broadly speaking, I believe the density and visual impact of new developments will need to be questioned more thoroughly at the business planning stage; if connection with the location matters, it follows that orientation of the buildings, outdoor space and views are key. Post-pandemic concerns about hygiene will probably mean the end of the buffet as we've known it, an acceleration in the trend of direct check-in to guestrooms and the de-cluttering of spaces as well as use of new, inherently anti-bacterial materials. I hope it will also mean the return of natural ventilation.

There is a further issue. Our recent experience should also have shone a light on the importance of employee wellbeing. They too deserve, and will expect, spaces with outdoor connection, decent relaxation areas and a staff restaurant serving nourishing food.

Hospitality Insights: It is expected that when travel comes back, there will be a need for more conscious travel: how can hospitality companies prepare for this new demand?

Vafiadis: I certainly agree that the "conscious" traveller will reject the old product formulas in favour of authenticity, discovering new ideas and even learning new skills. For all of us involved in creating or rejuvenating hospitality destinations, this means giving guests the space to breathe, an experience of purpose and a sense of belonging. For designers in particular, it is about telling meaningful stories related to the place, past and present. These narratives should charm, sometimes amaze, and always speak to timeless values.

I think the way people travel is also likely to change – more multi-generational family groups, fewer but longer trips and, now that we've survived trial by enforced remote working and discovered certain advantages, more people seeking accommodation where they can work and play with equal ease.

Hospitality Insights: You are adept at reimagining space to make it work harder. Where are the best opportunities now for hotels to use space differently and generate new revenue opportunities?

Vafiadis: My advice to clients has always been to create a design with substance, thereby achieving longevity. This means starting with an understanding of how your building performs for your guests and re-planning

spaces if necessary. How do guests navigate the public areas? Where are their memory moments? How should the relationship between back- and front-of-house work? And much more. Clearly, the perception of personal space has never been more important. In this regard, luxury hotels are fortunate because they have always offered this, although there is probably an even stronger case now for long-stay apartments where guests can be completely private. I would not be surprised if we see a significant percentage of self-catering villas upgraded to a luxury level, complete with their own spa, garden and ample dining space and with a concierge level of service so that guests do not need to leave their villa at all if they don't want to. City hotels have an opportunity to pick up on the hybrid working market – after all they have the service infrastructure to support this – and I think there is a very interesting opportunity coming down the line for wellness hotels with state-of-the-art medical facilities at their core.

Hospitality Insights: The projects you have worked on, such as Costa Navarino in Greece or the Burgenstock Resort in Switzerland, celebrate their locality: how can hotels improve their links with their local environments to meet the needs of both travellers and their local communities?

Vafiadis: There are numerous ways and many of our clients offer fascinating opportunities for guests to go into the local community and give something back. Recently, we had the wonderful experience of working with a client who was a passionate art collector and curating art for his city hotel which would give guests an insight into their location that only the locals would know. In this way, we hoped to inspire guests to go out into the local neighbourhoods rather than sticking to well-trammelled tourist spots.

Maria is an established thought-leader within the hospitality design world, admired for her roll-call of beautiful and ingeniously designed projects, sought out by discerning property owners and respected for the value she brings to all her work. She is as confident in imagining large, imposing spaces as she is in creating intimate, cosy interiors; whether designing the boldly contemporary or within the classical genre, she draws on location and cultural heritage and creates something unique. An architect by training and an interior designer by choice, she combines visionary use of space with design that reaches out beyond trend, that is commercially astute, innovative and delightfully surprising.

Maria established MKV Design in London in 2000 after an early career which had taken her from Athens to Milan and onto the UK. Since then, she has cultivated a business which has worked across Europe, in the Middle East and in Africa. Current/recent projects include: the Bürgenstock Collection in Switzerland; Costa Navarino, Messinia, Greece; the Sheraton Grand London Park Lane; Lucknam Park, Wiltshire; Mykonos Riviera Hotel & Spa; the Grand Hyatt Hotel & Residences, Abu Dhabi; Hôtel Royal Savoy Lausanne; the Hotel Schweizerhof Bern and Matild Palace, a Luxury Collection Hotel, in Budapest.

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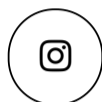
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