Re-imagining The Hotel Guestroom for The Millennial Business Traveler
Alexis Oliver

By now we've all heard the forecast: the Millennial Generation is set to take the country's business travel industry by storm. By 2020, Millennials will make up 50% of U.S. business travelers, and will carry $1.3 trillion to $1.7 trillion in total spending power, according to Jeff Fromm, a marketing specialist and co-author of the book "Marketing to Millennials: Reach the Largest and Most Influential Generation of Consumers Ever."

Almost every major brand in the lodging industry has allocated considerable resources toward capturing the attention and loyalty of this new breed of guest. As a hospitality designer, I've spent countless hours poring over the consumer insights presented to me by those brands in an effort to extrude them into successful physical spaces. This is, of course, how I approach every project, but as a 30-something, I am, in this instance, in the rare position of being my own target demographic.

Much has been written about the importance that Millennials place on unique or novel travel experiences. It is important to note, however, that this is not the same ilk of novelty that is usually associated with Ian Schrager and the boutique hotel movement of decades past. While wit, authenticity, and sense of place are strongly valued by my generation, so too is transparency. Millennials are drawn to thoughtful function, minimalism, and visible high-quality craft.

We somehow manage to hate consumerism while voraciously consuming. We drive unsexy hybrid cars, buy Levis over designer jeans, and eat local, sustainable, organic, inglorious, "slow" food. We subscribe to the "buy one, give one" business model that drives iconic Millennial brands like Toms and Warby Parker. We are a generation that prizes the appearance of egalitarianism and shuns apparent snobbery, and we are willing to absorb the added cost of life choices that we perceive as "meaningful." That which is simple and clear is far more prized than anything flashy or fussy.

Because we live in a universe where we are constantly bombarded with information, it is the rare moment of "silence" which feels most indulgent. This drastically changes our definition of need versus luxury, and in doing so offers us a new yardstick with which to measure "good design." So how can the hospitality industry more effectively cater to the basic needs of the Millennial business traveler?

Connectivity, not cable.

The average 30-year-old guest travels with at least a laptop and a smart phone, and often a tablet and second phone. Fast and free WiFi in all rooms is table stakes for the Millennial guest. So is having ample opportunity to charge devices.

In 1951, Hilton became the first hotel chain to install televisions in every guest room. Today, cable TV, on a large screen, is universally accepted as a basic amenity in hotel guest rooms at both full- and select-service properties.

The average hotel guestroom size in the US is about 325 square feet. Subtract 100 or so square feet of that for bath and entry areas, and we're left with a living space that is, on average, twelve by nineteen feet. With the exception of, perhaps, artwork, there is no accessory or piece of equipment in the average guestroom that is more massive than the TV set. There is certainly nothing else in the room that demands so much real
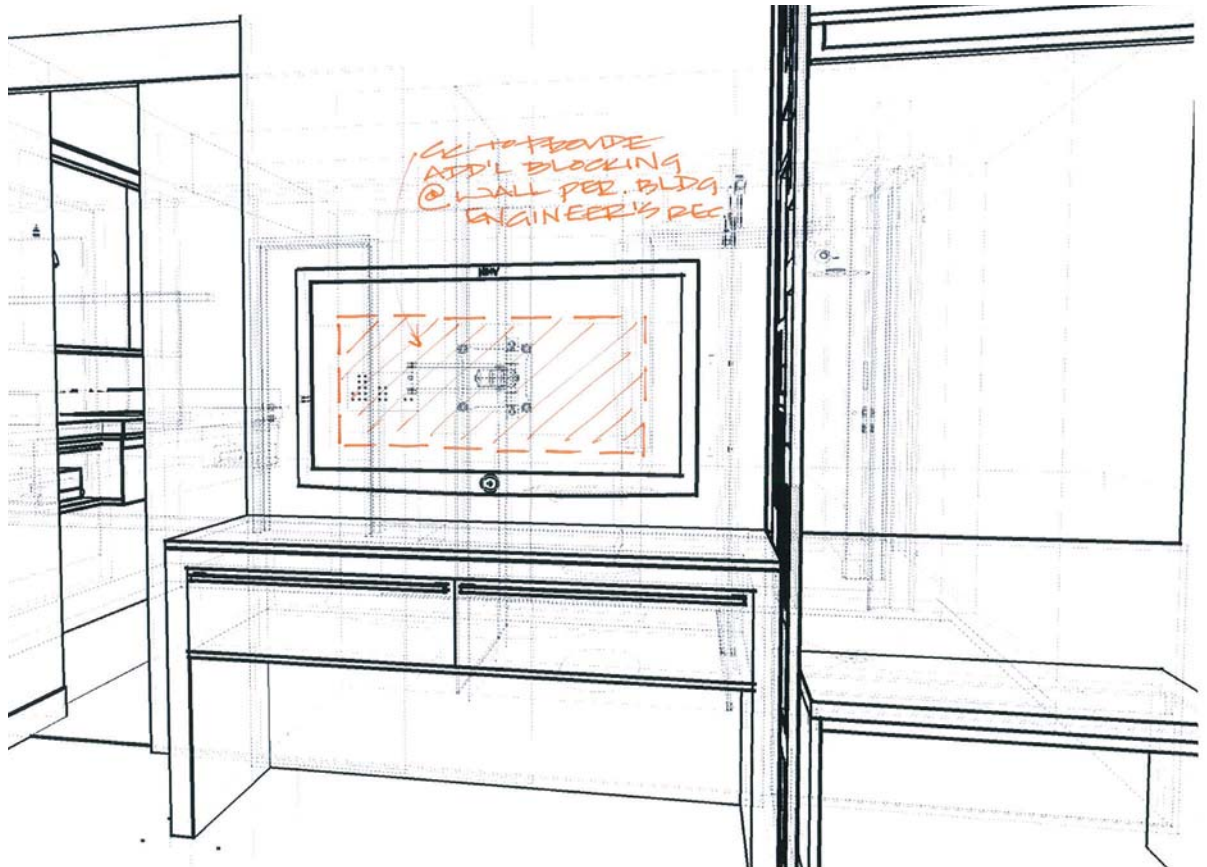
estate when not in use.

As a designer, I can attest to the fact that there is no inexpensive way to camouflage a large television in a small room. My colleagues and I are thus tasked with developing construction details and furniture pieces that support, house, or even highlight these large screens, while concealing the myriad cables and substantial structural reinforcements they require.

This summer LG announced the development of an OLED-based television that is so thin and pliable it can be rolled into a three-inch-diameter tube when not in use. Per the prominent tech news site Mashable, LG claims it is "confident it'll be able to build a 60-inch 4K TV that's both transparent and flexible by 2017." From an investment standpoint, it seems these television sets we so diligently work to accommodate are far from "future-proof" in either performance or appearance. In spite of this, I have found that there is a often a willingness among owners to pay for new televisions to replace existing units at a 1:1 ratio, a cost that includes not only the TV sets themselves (most often 47" or 55" models), but also the requisite revamp of any associated cabling infrastructure and video distribution systems.

What's ironic about this is that most Millennial travelers already choose to view video content on their laptops, tablets or even phones, where they can access their Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime and HBOGo accounts, rather than flipping through unfamiliar channels, begrudgingly beholden to real-time programming, using a tv remote that is largely perceived as one of the least sanitary objects in the room. Last week I came across an article from the website lifehacker.com, entitled "Get Around Hotel Wifi Blocks and Use Your Chromecast When Traveling." The article per se was little more than a blurb pointing to the original source of this "lifehack," but it was – tellingly – followed by 77 reader comments in which a much more lengthy discussion of the topic ensued. True to form, the Millennial traveler will almost inevitably try to "hack" whatever technology we find in our rooms in order to turn it into a system that better suits our needs.
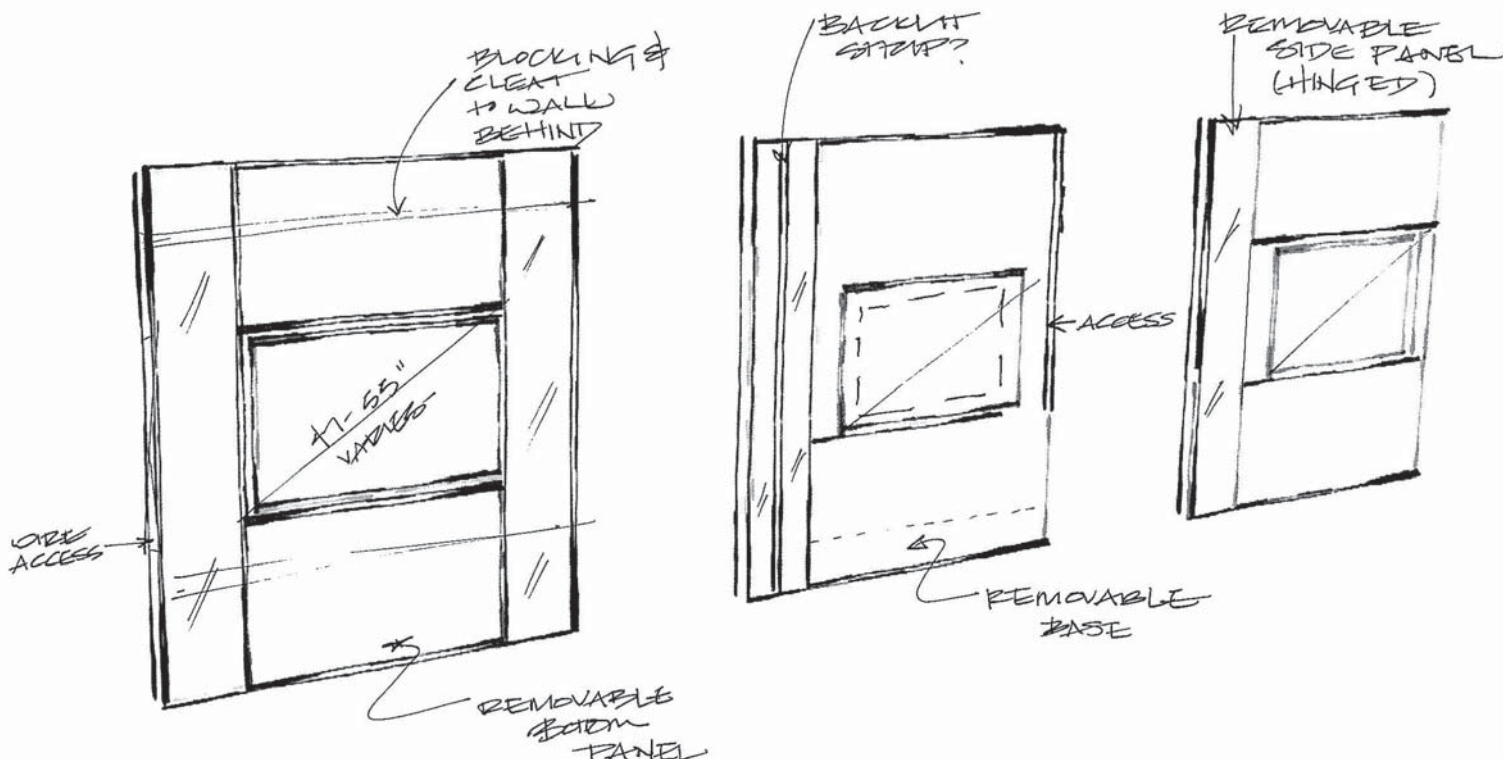
These small panels allow hotel guests to connect their device-to-tv.

Rather than offering tech amenities that are prescriptive, brands and property owners would be wise to re-imagine in-room technology as a versatile platform that supports a wide range of guest-provided devices. There are already several products on the market today, for instance, that offer device-to-tv connectivity for hospitality applications. These panels are only slightly larger than a deck of cards, require no special cabling, and currently cost roughly $150 per key. They are exactly what every business traveler under the age of 35 wants to encounter in their room, but they're an extremely difficult sell, because they're perceived as a luxury rather than a basic amenity. The TV is certainly still an essential element in the Millennial

traveler's ideal guestroom, but its purpose there is to act as a vehicle for custom content that is "programmed" by each individual guest via a Bluetooth or HDMI connection (and, more often than not, an internet connection as well).

Things should have a prescribed place, actions should not.

Let's revisit that 225 square foot living space I mentioned earlier. The average hotel room takes that 225 square feet and fills it with a king size bed, a lounge chair and side table, a desk and task chair, and a dresser or armoire. The issue with this layout is twofold: first, there is the sheer bulk of all those furnishings, second it is functionally rigid.

While I won't go so far as to say that the age of the MacBook Air has rendered the standard desk-and-task-chair completely obsolete as the "workstation" in a guestroom, it has certainly leveled the playing field. Millennial guests regularly work on the bed, for instance. This is especially true if the desk is the only available hard surface in the room, when it often becomes a place to eat, iron clothes, or charge devices. The lounge chair, meanwhile, largely serves as a kind of catch-

Flex Furnishings provide a guest with a small piece of furniture that has multiple uses including seating, storage, and table-top space.

all for clothes and shopping bags, or for the roughly 1/3 of Millennial travelers who live directly out of their suitcase for the duration of their stay, the lounge chair becomes a makeshift luggage valet.

It is important to the over-stimulated Millennial guest to see their hotel room as a respite from the busyness of the workday and the demanding nature of travel. We desire a feeling of thoughtful spaciousness and order, as well as a sense of flexibility. We crave a room that offers a place for each of our belongings while inviting us to lounge, work, or socialize without a the implication of a pre-designated area for each activity.

From a design standpoint, the task at hand is to invert the existing guestroom paradigm by letting the form of the furnishings be defined by the actions of the guest (sort of a "Mies for the new Millennium" approach).

This means developing guestrooms that feature multi-purpose furnishings, plenty of clear horizontal space, ample access to power outlets, and well-planned lighting.

The widespread criticism of Millennials as narcissistic and entitled may or may not be deserved, but there is no denying that we are a resourceful and motivated bunch, unburdened – however annoyingly – by a fear of failure. For the Millennial generation, if the proverbial shoe doesn't fit, we'll use freeware and 3d printing to rapidly proto type a new shoe, secure venture capital funding for our start-up shoe company, grow it into a profitable business through a clever viral marketing campaign, and then sell the company to Amazon. We are hackers of all things, and we prize adaptability, not only in the ether, but also in the physical realm.▪

The Flex Furnishing Maisonsette furniture takes up little space and allows flexibility of function and placement.

Alexis Oliver is a New York City-based interior architect with over 10 years of experience in the hospitality design industry. She is currently a Senior Designer at Krause+Sawyer, and was previously a Project Manager at the Rockwell Group. She has worked with developers and brands such as Host Hotels and Resorts, Starwood, Marriott, and Hilton on four- and five-star projects across three continents. She hopes to eventually stay at the properties she works on after they are renovated. Alexis holds a BA in Architecture from The University of Pennsylvania. She can be reached via email at ao@alexisoliver.com