



The Front Desks of Boston

Michael Oshins

The role of front desks has not changed significantly since the Parker House, the longest continually operating hotel in the United States, opened in 1855. The activities of welcoming guests upon arrival, assisting guests during their stay, and settling accounts upon departure are still the mainstay of the front desk.

Although the function of the hotel front desk has

remained static, its form has evolved. Front desks now differ widely in terms of aesthetics and, in some cases, even operational patterns. These variations derive from the physical characteristics of particular hotels, architectural and design trends, the strategic positions of properties and brands, advancements in hotel operations, and the changing expectations of consumers. ■



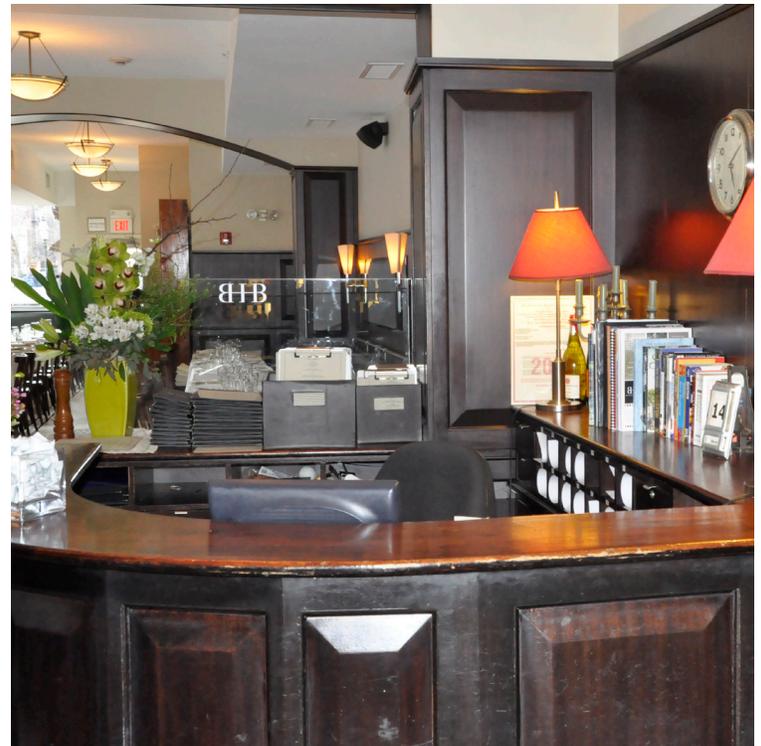
OLD WORLD CHARM

Early designs separated employees from guests, in the same way that an orchestra pit separated the actors from the audience in a theater. The purpose was both practical and symbolic, to provide security and to reinforce a sense of formality. This is illustrated by the front desks at two of the oldest hotels in Boston, the Parker House (left) and the Lenox (right). Notice the dark wood, marble counters, ornate decoration, and gold highlights that were typical of the era.



CHANGING WITH THE TIMES

When the Four Seasons opened (top), the front office had separate areas for the functions of checking in and checking out. A small alcove was inset to the left of the main desk, to create a private space to discuss the sensitive topic of finances. When the lobby was renovated two decades later (bottom), these areas were combined into a single front desk.



THE RACK

Before the advent of computerized reservations systems, hotel managers used racks to organize room keys, account statements, and guest messages. The common industry term 'rack rate' derives from this era, and is now widely used to denote the highest published rate for a room. The Beacon Hill Hotel & Bistro, which was created by combining two nineteenth century townhouses, still uses their rack (visible under the counter along the wall) in conjunction with their computer system.



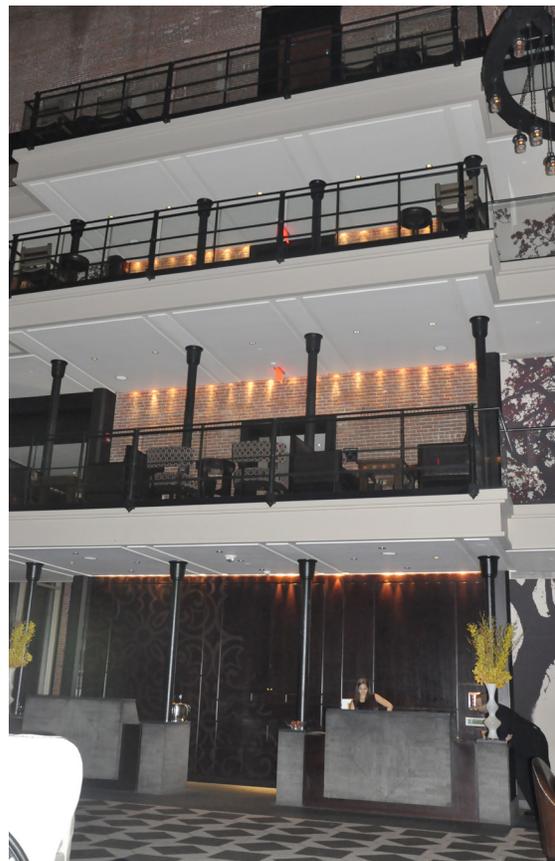
A REAL DESK

At the Ritz-Carlton, arriving guests are seated and checked-in at 'real' desks. This is the only hotel in Boston with this feature, which is more common among luxury hotels in Europe.



SIZE MATTERS

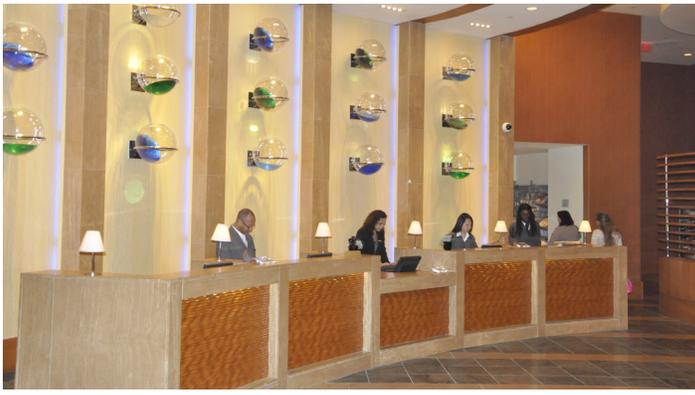
The size of the front desk is often proportional to the size of the lobby, the surrounding public spaces, and the hotel exterior. The Sheraton (below), the largest hotel in Boston with more than a thousand rooms, also has one of the largest lobbies and front desk areas in the city. Toward the other end of the size continuum, the luxury boutique hotel XV Beacon (left) has a mere 63 rooms and a similarly small lobby, with a front desk suitable for one person.



ADAPTIVE REUSE

As the oldest major city in the United States, Boston has numerous historic buildings that been converted to new uses, including lodging. The Liberty Hotel was originally the Charles Street Prison (left). The Loews Back Bay Hotel was originally the headquarters for the Boston Police (right top). The Langham Hotel was originally the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston (right bottom). The front desks of these converted hotels were designed to fit into the re-purposed spaces.





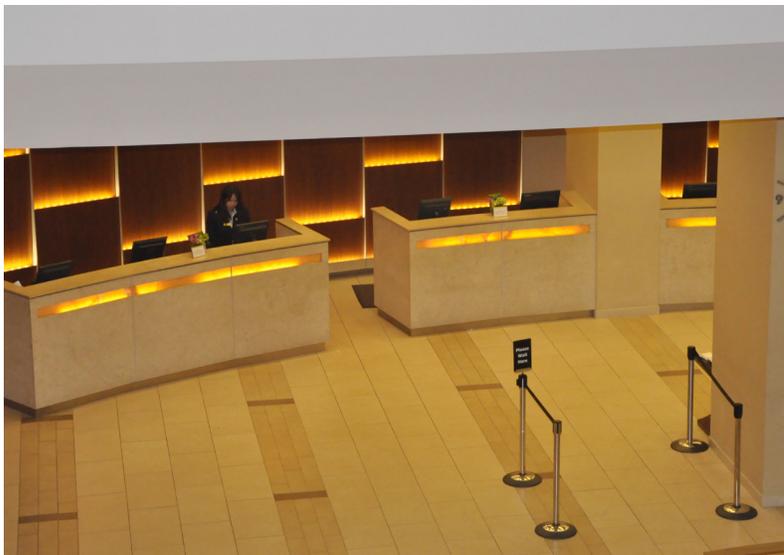
SIMPLE YET ELEGANT

As decades change, so do consumer preferences. Hotels built during the past decade often highlight modern and post-modern style including geometric shapes and minimalism. The Renaissance (left top), the InterContinental (left bottom), and the Mandarin Oriental (below) illustrate these sleeker trends.



EXCITING AND INTIMATE

The atrium is a design element that originated millennia ago, in both residential and lodging properties. Atrium hotels gained renewed popularity during the 1970s after architect John Portman created a series of stunning properties for Hyatt. Although visually exciting, atrium spaces can be quite noisy. This interferes with private discussions between customers and front desk employees about finances, personal requests, and room assignments. Such hotels often remove their front desks from the larger open space and use lower ceilings to create more intimate settings. Examples include the Marriott Copley Place (below), the Marriott Long Wharf (right top), and the Westin Waterfront (right bottom).





REMOVING BARRIERS

The physical barriers that separated guests and employees during the nineteenth century have been replaced by more open designs that represent the breakdown of barriers, both physically and symbolically. Modular front desks provide more flexible, open, and accessible spaces. This newer format is used at the Hyatt Regency (top left), the Westin Copley Place (bottom left), the W Hotel (top right), and the Westin Waterfront (bottom right).



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