

Repositioning Hotels

BY VERNON MAYS

“You have to start with brand strategy,” says Gensler’s Gail Brackett, speaking of hotel repositioning. The Beverly Hilton is a case in point. Opened in 1955, the instantly iconic hotel set the standard for luxury in Los Angeles. When Gensler was asked by the new owners to revive its appeal for today’s luxury travelers, Brackett and her colleague Russell Banks commissioned market research to understand their needs.

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Because the Beverly Hilton is the site of the annual Golden Globe Awards, the market researchers found that luxury travelers still associate the hotel with the Golden Age of Hollywood. That inspired the hotel’s brand and repositioning. Along with new materials and finishes in the hotel’s major public spaces and 570 guest rooms, Gensler developed a new graphic identity system and even renamed meeting rooms to reflect and reinforce a Golden Globe theme. For example, classic Hollywood stars make their appearance in elements like the oversized murals on guest floors and in the parking garage.

Center of the Action

When it was built the 1960s, San Francisco’s Chinatown Holiday Inn was aimed at tourists. Big and brutal, the hotel had a gloomy entrance overshadowed by a sky-bridge linking to nearby Portsmouth Square Park. “It had all the élan of a bus terminal,” says Jeff Henry. When the hotel was sold and rebranded as a Hilton, Henry and his Gensler S.F. hotel repositioning team were brought in.

Despite the location at the eastern edge of Chinatown, the hotel is very much in the center of San Francisco’s north of Market business and financial district, in walking distance of downtown office towers, boutique ad and creative agencies, government buildings, and North Beach, another tourist draw. In other words, it’s surprisingly well located for business travelers. It also has great views of the city and the bay. Hilton saw an opportunity to upgrade the hotel to business class and leave the budget-conscious package tour group market to others. Still, there was the “bus terminal” to consider.

“The old front entrance was like going into a black hole,” says Gensler’s Bob Wheatley. That became the focal point of a

repositioning effort that addressed the base of the building and its lower floors—the lobby and meeting space. At the street level, Gensler’s designers extended the lobby outward, cladding it in floor-to-ceiling glass and aluminum panels. They also installed glass panels and lighting under the sky-bridge. Dramatically lit, these changes make the hotel entrance the brightest spot on the street, like a theater marquee. New stairs and paving on the porte cochere reach out to welcome people.

A Global/Local Theme

The business traveler attracted to a location like this one has to be interested in the local scene and prepared to get closer to it to savor its attractions. That set the theme for an interior renovation that had to do wonders within a remarkably compact volume. The new décor references Chinatown across the street, but doesn’t overdo it. Given the international character of the clientele, there are world city clocks above the front desk and a big local area map nearby. When you walk in the lobby, there’s a bar (coffee in the a.m., drinks in the p.m.) and spa out near the front doors, and an Asian fusion restaurant visible across the back (relocated from upstairs, where, not surprisingly, it didn’t do much business).

Existing (and intrusive) escalators connecting the lobby to the meeting spaces upstairs are literally hidden in cabinetwork that creates cozy niches for reading the paper or sipping an espresso. “It feels civilized and residential,” Henry explains. “That’s part of the hotel’s appeal. Business travelers see a lot of sameness—one place starts to look like another. We wanted them to feel at home, and to feel that they can walk out and experience the real San Francisco at their leisure—it’s right there, waiting for them.”

On the strength of their work on the rebranded Hilton, Henry and his Gensler team were asked by Joie de Vivre, a boutique hotel specialist, to update the former Miyako, once the favorite of the Rolling Stones when they performed in San Francisco. It is now renamed the Hotel Kabuki, and its Japantown location inspired a redesign that fuses a warm modernity with elements of traditional Japan.

“These three very different properties show that hotel repositioning is a completely scalable concept,” Henry says. “And if you set your brand strategy and align design to it, then hotel repositioning can really work its magic,” adds Gensler’s Russell Banks.

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