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## Five-Star Design

More than service with a smile, **Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide** believes in service with style.

By Matt Alderton

It's a 12-by-25-foot rectangle that totals approximately 300 square feet. There's a three-piece bathroom—a sink, a shower, and a toilet—to the left. To the right, a closet. Straight ahead, a window, parallel to which is a bed in between two nightstands, opposite a small desk and dresser. On the dresser, a television and, probably, a lamp. Save for a throw on the bed, or maybe a painting on the wall, it's a beige prison with a peephole instead of bars.

If you've been in one hotel room, you've been in thousands. That is, unless that room belongs to Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc., which owns, operates, or franchises more than 1,100 properties in nearly 100 countries. Distributed across nine brands—including Sheraton Hotels & Resorts, Westin Hotels & Resorts, and W Hotels—its portfolio pushes the hotel-design envelope with the belief that a superior guest experience requires a superior guest environment.



"Starwood is well known in the industry as an innovative, design-centric company, and as a result, each one of our brands has an emphasis on innovative design," says John Lapins, the company's vice president of architecture and construction for the Americas. "Some of our competitors stress a tried-and-true operational setup, but conversely, their physical product can be fairly boring in terms of design. Starwood focuses on the guest experience to achieve both."

Although Starwood has a separate global design group that handles interior design, all construction projects in North America, from new builds to renovations and rebrands, fall under the purview of Lapins and his team, who help the company maintain its competitive advantage by implementing and enforcing standards for architecture, construction, and design. The result—consistency minus conformity—stimulates Starwood's guests while also strengthening its brands.



### GROWING THE BRAND

Westin embodies perfectly Starwood's commitment to branded building and design. Catering especially to business travelers, the hotel chain's core promise is health and wellness.

"The focus across all [Westin] programming—whether it's design, food and beverage, or fitness centers—is a personal focus on renewal and wellness," Lapins says. "We simply want you to feel better when you leave the hotel than you did when you got there."

To that end, every Westin hotel offers a special menu featuring nutrient-rich "superfoods" such as salmon, spinach, beans, green tea, and berries. Westin hotels also have branded WestinWORKOUT Fitness Studios, with cardio machines, strength-training equipment, and free weights.

Westin's latest statement is vertical gardens. Introduced as a brand standard in 2012, the gardens must be incorporated into the lobby of every new or remodeled Westin, though their size, placement, and composition are up to the hotels' individual owners and design teams. Consisting of wall-mounted modules with infill panels made of natural materials such as wood, metal, and stone, the walls promote the concept of "biophilia"—the belief that people have an innate need to connect with nature, that it affects their physical and mental well-being.

"A lot of [Westin's] designs, textures, and colors come from nature; the overall look and feel is meant to instill a sense of relaxation and, some people might say, Zen," Lapins says. "The vertical garden comes out of this nod to nature on one hand and out of the wellness theme on the other."

In fact, many of the plants that have been approved for Westin's vertical gardens—including, for example, philodendrons, ferns, and English ivy—act as air purifiers. "Obviously, all plants give off oxygen," Lapins says, "but many of these plants literally cleanse the air."



### SUSTAINABLE STYLE

In spirit, Westin's vertical gardens complement another Starwood design program: the "30/20 by 20" sustainability initiative. The initiative is a collective effort to reduce Starwood's energy and water consumption by 30 percent and 20 percent, respectively, by the year 2020. The initiative encompasses all the hotels globally in each of the company's nine brands.

"We did energy audits across all hotels in 2008 to set baselines," Lapins says. "Now, every year, each hotel tracks its individual energy and water savings [against those baselines] using utilities information."

In collaboration with Starwood's engineering and sustainability experts, Lapins and his team use the hotels' annual reports to strategize ways for optimizing—and, ultimately, reducing—each facility's consumption. As of mid-2013, the company was more than halfway toward its energy goal and had already surpassed its water goal, having reduced its hotels' energy and water consumption by 16.16 percent and 21.93 percent, respectively.

"As corporate citizens, we're looking to push the sustainability agenda," says Lapins, who stresses the benefits of

eco-consciousness not only for the environment but also for the enterprise. "Sustainability feeds into the bottom line; if you're saving energy, you're saving money."

The company's progress so far is thanks in large part to technologies tested by its Element brand, many of which have been rolled out to other Starwood hotels. "We use Element as our 'sustainability laboratory,' if you will, for our other eight brands," Lapins says. "It's a brand standard that every Element hotel must be LEED-certified. We have electric-car charging, in-room energy-management systems—all standard."



### 'ALOFT'-Y IDEA

Although the "30/20 by 20" initiative applies to existing Starwood hotels, sustainability is always in mind for new ones, as well—particularly new Aloft hotels. Several are adaptive-reuse projects, including the Aloft Tulsa Downtown in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which opened in 2013 inside the former city hall.



Introduced in 2008, Aloft is a specialty-select hotel brand that's closely related to Starwood's full-service W brand. Like the latter, the former is design-centric; in the spirit of boutique hotels, every Aloft has a unique layout and aesthetic tailored to the area it's in. And, each hotel provides consistent programming tied into the brand's focus—"style at a steal"—as evidenced by Aloft's recent partnership with Design Within Reach for lobby furniture and fixture pieces.

Of Starwood's nine brands, Aloft is one of Lapins's favorites because it demonstrates perfectly the relationship between brand and building. Aloft strives to give guests an unconventional stay, and it achieves this in large part by giving them atypical guest rooms—square, with 9-foot-high ceilings and window-facing beds—and eccentric communal areas for socializing, including the w xyz bar in some Aloft locations, which pairs signature cocktails with live music from local musicians.

"Starwood continues to be an innovator in hospitality," Lapins says. "We strive to be different, and Aloft as a brand is as different as it gets."

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