

# FOCAL POINT

The newest hotel lobby renovations hone in on social dynamics

BY DENISE DEVEAU

In the past, hotel lobbies were not much more than waiting rooms where guests spent as little time as possible. Today's lobbies are morphing into social hubs where guests converge to work, play, wine and dine.

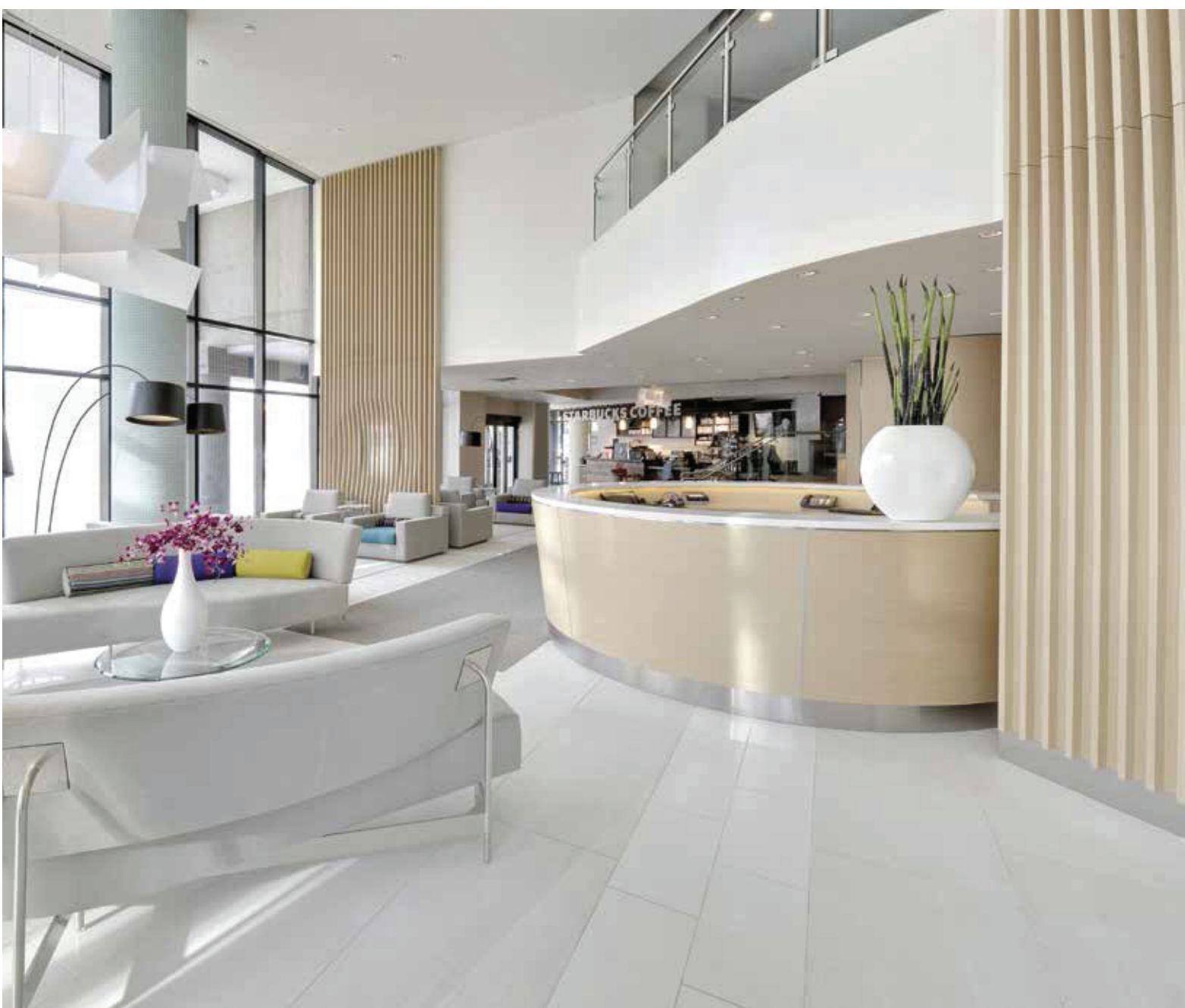
The newest lobby re-designs boast larger spaces, more amenities (from cafés to retail stores), and reception pods that usher staff forward from the back wall to centre stage. Workstations and sombre colours are out, while communal living-room style furniture groupings and light, bright palettes are in.

Lobby design is now about creating social spaces and merging different functions into one area, says Greg Keffer, principal and studio leader at Rockwell Group, a New York-based architecture and design firm. "They're breaking down the boundary lines between more traditional uses," he says, adding that the advent of Wi-Fi is making lobbies focal areas for meetings.

Although lobbies are wide-open spaces, intimacy is

*WARM WELCOME (clockwise, right) The Radisson Admiral Hotel Toronto Harbourfront ushers in a new era with a bright and spacious lobby and cube-style seating; revamped luxe accoutrements reglamorize the historic Fairmont Le Château Frontenac; fresh, family oriented spaces contribute to the social atmosphere at the upgraded Westin Trillium House, Blue Mountain*





offered through strategic furniture groupings. “It’s very important to not have just one big space for everybody,” Keffer explains. “It’s all about personalization and connecting with people.”

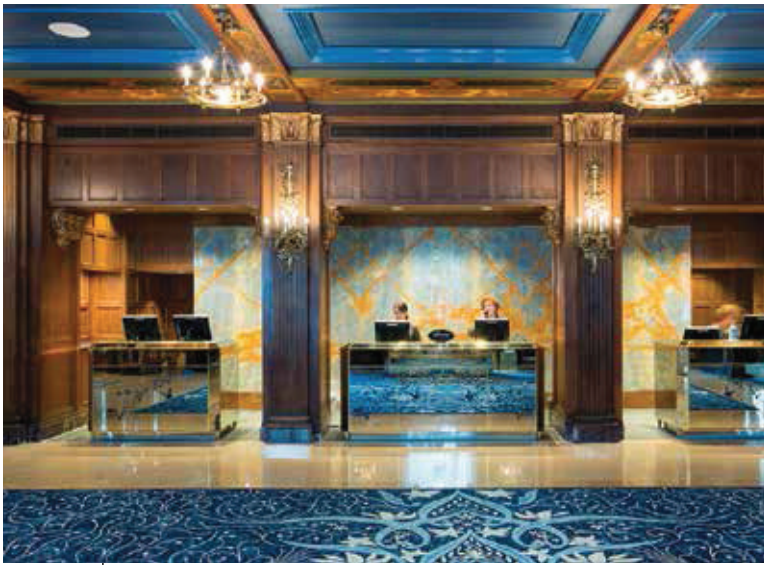
#### REVITALIZING HISTORY

The Rockwell Group was behind the design of one of the Fairmont Le Château Frontenac’s biggest renovations in its more than century-long history, which was completed last month. Of the \$75-million budget, approximately \$2 million was devoted to rejuvenating the lobby area, says Robert Mercure, hotel GM. “It wasn’t just a renovation. It was a reinvention to set us up for decades to come.”

The design marries historical elements with contemporary touches. “They took great pains reconditioning, preserving and highlighting the beauty behind the woodwork,” Mercure explains. “You can really see the original design work from 1892 that you didn’t see before.” Designers restored the marble floors, stained glass







*A NEW ERA* The recently renovated Fairmont Le Château Frontenac's rich, new colour scheme and backlit blue onyx panel behind the front desk is inspired by the St. Lawrence River

windows, original wall sconces, lighting fixtures (including relamping and replating a huge chandelier in the grand stairwell leading to the ballroom) and revolving doors.

The preservation was complemented by new, bold stylistic elements, such as backlit marble walls behind reception pods and all-new neo-modern lobby furniture that pays homage to the original designs of the Maxwell brothers, the architects who designed the tower, furniture and light fixtures in the 1920s.

Opulent burnt orange and rich blue palettes represent a departure from the previous browns, beiges and golds. "Those colours were a hallmark of the past," says Mercure. "We went for stunning complementary colours that are both up-to-date and harken back to Quebec's history."

Much of the adjacent business centre has been eliminated to make way for new retail shops. Meanwhile, a new lower level lobby has been added specifically for checking in groups and tours.

"The minute you walk in now you feel the grandeur of the hotel," Mercure says. "It has more punch, it's fresher and more dynamic while still respecting our history."

#### CREATING A NEW ENERGY

Guests are in for a visual treat at the Radisson Admiral Hotel Toronto Harbourfront on Queen's Quay, as the

#### MUSIC TO THEIR EARS

The right music choice can be a critical part of a guest's experience in the hotel lobby, says Brad Pressman, president of Private Label Music, a Reseda, Calif.-based custom music provider. "It's one of the first things people experience when they walk into a hotel." With the advent of Internet and satellite radio, choices are limitless. Trends today, include:

**"Chill out" music.** Pressman recommends 80 per cent instrumental, 20 per cent light vocal to put people at ease, "but not to sleep."

**Light rock** is a popular choice, especially during the evening/overnight hours when there's a younger mix of people passing through the lobby.

Depending on the location, **light/smooth jazz or classical** are also in-demand during later hours.

Today, with everything from subscription-based music services to mixes provided on hard drives for a flat fee to pre-loaded iPods, there are lots of options to appeal to guest needs. "Their tastes have widened considerably, so they expect variety. In the '70s hotels played what suppliers wanted them to play. Now you literally have a world of music at your fingertips," says Pressman.

property has recently undergone a complete renovation, including an overhaul of its lobby area.

GM Dermot McKeown says that the work was well timed, given the focus on the upcoming 2015 PanAm Games. "The city is pouring millions into Queen's Quay to make it a beautiful street," he says. The renovations are part of an overall Radisson initiative to improve its portfolio throughout North America by 2015. While there were design standards to follow, the Toronto-based architecture and design firm Chase International took aspects of the design in a slightly different direction. "It has a very different feel from what we had before. The design is very bright and modern and a bit European," the GM notes.

The elevator, open stainless steel and wood staircase, and main door are all within immediate view, making it easier for staff to see people coming and going. The wall separating the lobby from the elevator bank was knocked down, and the overall space was expanded by 1,000.-sq.ft. to accommodate a Starbucks café and additional seating. Light-coloured curved and cube-style seating dotted with eye-popping cushions was also added as well as suspended lamps and a revamped music selection to create ambiance.

It's also a perfect setting for business travellers, McKeown says. "There are outlets everywhere so people can take their coffee or laptop and sit comfortably while doing their work. It's so comfortable, they want to stay in that space now."

The reception desk has also now become a centrepiece.

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“It used to be like a typical banker’s box style of lobby,” McKeown explains. It’s been transformed with light-coloured wood and bold plants. McKeown is surprised by the new energy of the lobby. “It’s almost like a light switch turned on. The change was immediate. There’s a sense of relaxation and socializing. It looks busy, engaged and interactive. And the staff react differently. They feel they’re more in control, because they’re right there to greet you.”

### SMALL CHANGES, BIG RESULTS

At \$70,000, the renovation budget for the Westin Trillium House, Blue Mountain lobby in Blue Mountains, Ont. may seem small in comparison to other hotel projects, but GM Stacy Manning says it has completely changed the way guests interact.

“This hotel opened in 2005, so things were fairly current. Most of the larger investment for this renovation went to rooms, hallways, function spaces and workout rooms,” she says.

Even though it’s a resort, the trends in large urban hotels catering to corporate travellers translate very nicely into leisure. “People are grabbing laptops, and there are more social hubs no matter what brand you’re staying in.

Everyone is looking to create more comfortable lobbies for people to enjoy,” says Manning. So, furniture was rearranged to create closer groupings in conversational areas. There’s also an upstairs lobby area that provides extra room for families or business guests to gather and sit. Because of the lobby’s small size, nesting tables of various heights were added to free up floor space.

“Before it was brown leather sofas with woods. Now it’s light and airy, with light greens, lots of tub chairs and square sofas,” Manning explains. “The carpets are still dark enough with enough pattern, so we don’t have issues [with stains].”

More often than not, guests don’t want to stay in their rooms. “We’re bringing a real vibrancy to lobbies. It provides opportunities for tweens and teens to get together with their moms and dads. Parents come to enjoy a coffee in the lobby, while the kids are on their iPods or texting. We’ve also seen people conduct small meetings where there are sofas and chairs,” she adds.

Manning says when the design was completed just before Christmas, the effect was palpable. “There was an instant change in the capacity of the people in the lobby. I was shocked at how quickly changing the furniture and moving things around changed things.” ♦

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