

At these hotels, rooms are almost an afterthought

Elianna Lev

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A new type of hotel is cropping up across North America that's far from the traditional definition of lodging.

These hotels are strategically marketed as cultural hubs, often in renovated multidisciplinary spaces with colourful pasts, which sometimes attract more locals than out-of-towners.

Vancouver's Waldorf Hotel, for instance, opened last fall in the city's gritty East Side after extensive renovations and rebranding. Despite having the word “hotel” in its official title, the staff behind the multipurpose “creative compound” admits that accommodation isn't a priority when promoting the hotel.

“We thought the hotel would be a bigger focus but the cultural activity is more important,” said Danny Fazio, the Waldorf's brand and design director.

“They're never going to be a big revenue for us, so we look at the hotel rooms as being amenities to the overall experience.”

Along with 30 hotel rooms, the complex houses two restaurants, two music venues, a tiki bar, a hair salon and a recording studio that's currently being built for a planned music residency program. The Waldorf is quickly becoming a go-to venue for regular cultural events, such as a monthly poetry and music night called Blues and Haikus and the vintage clothing showcase The Chosen Ones.

“We tell people that stay here that there's always something going on,” Mr. Fazio said. “You're not going to come here if you want to cosy up in your room at 10 o'clock at night.”

Though the Gladstone and Drake hotels in Toronto put more focus into their rooming, they follow a philosophy similar to that of the Waldorf. Both have a mandate that incorporates local culture in everything they do – whether it's collaborating with the Toronto Opera Company on an opera education class at the Drake or hosting a craft fair at the Gladstone.

“The people who come to visit us want to be entertained, they're interested and open and curious about culture and the arts and design,” said Ana Yuristy, director of hotel operations at the Drake.

She credits this shift in hotel trends to the popular Ace Hotel. Founded in 1999 in Seattle, the American chain of boutique hotels has expanded in the past 10 years

to Portland, Palm Springs and New York.

It set a precedent by catering to thrifty travellers who wanted a cultural experience in a city, as well as a place to crash that was more sophisticated than a hostel but within the lower price range.

“People were starting to get bored of the cookie-cutter hotel concept and they were looking for something different,” Ms. Yuristy said. “They wanted that immersive experience.”

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