The rise of the independent hotel

The partnering of Ian Schrager and Bill Marriott to form Edition Hotels is the ultimate merger of once distant hotel branding philosophies. In previous years, that would have been akin to having Barack Obama and George Bush on the same political ticket. Marriott has long been the perpetrator of standardization while Schrager has been king of originality and uniqueness. Now comes the rise of the independent hotel. Millennials, Gen X, boomers and even the Greatest Generation, crave unique experience over standardization. We live in lofts and micro housing, drink third-wave coffee and craft beer, and fly on Southwest and Virgin Airlines, all experience-oriented choices. We like design-driven, community-focused, high-tech experiences for a good price. Once you finally look up from your smartphone, you want to be somewhere cool, with a sense of place.

Hotel choices can be made from easily accessible research with Google, Siri, social media and ratings apps, not 1-800-BRANDED. This demand increasingly is captured by entrepreneurs who have the flexibility to create independent hotels and highly customize boutique brands and franchises. Denver is a leader in the growth of the independent hotel, as noted by three current examples. Each of these properties is a new offering of Sage Hospitality and was designed in whole or in part by our firm.

• The Crawford Hotel – Denver Union Station. This hotel speaks for itself as the ultimate in unique design and experience soon to be infused by travelers arriving by commuter rail from Denver International Airport. The long-time dream of Dana Crawford shows everything cool about lower downtown, including a relaxed but sophisticated atmosphere that reflects its history with a modern interpretation. People can walk in and see friends, work or create with their laptop, while having a Colorado craft beer.

• Halcyon – A Cherry Creek hotel. Opening this summer, Halcyon was designed to offer what Cherry Creek wants – an experience hotel with luxurious, uniquely tailored guestrooms, world-class restaurant choices and rooftop pool experience. It essentially is an urban resort.

• The Diary Block Hotel – Lower Downtown Denver. Opening in February, the hotel at Diary Block will complement The Crawford and the Oxford with yet another independent offering that is part of a greater synergistic mixed-use project where creative office workers flow seamlessly through retail and restaurant offerings to the hotel lobby, punctuated by an urban courtyard and a link to the animated experience designed to redefine downtown Denver alley.

Today that number has skyrocketed. The left column in the chart shows a mere sampling of hotel brands that have emerged in the last 30 years. PricewaterhouseCoopers reported in April 2008 that 38 new hotel brands were introduced in the previous three years.

With franchise proximity restrictions relaxed for “sister” hotels, the effect on Denver and other cites was a larger number of guestrooms under the same umbrella. This has the opposite of the intended boutique/unique effect, blurring consumer perception. The brand chains borrows successful ideas from each other and multiply them through their distribution of multiple brands.

The long successful Hiltons, Sheratonos and Westins of the world will have to keep up with ever-emerging trends, benefiting all travelers with more lively and enriching designs as they spend their time in the global marketplace.

1988

Adam’s Mark
Doubletree
Embassy Suites
Fairmont
Four Seasons
Hilton
Hyatt
Intercontinental
Omni
Marriott
Ramada
Ritz Carlton
Sheraton
Westin (Western International)

2008

aLoft
Edition
Element
Grand Hyatt
Hyatt Place
Hilton Curio
Indigo
Marriott has 18 different brands
Monaco
Montage
Palomar
Renaissance
St. Regis
W Hotels

Commonly known American Hotel ‘brands’ in 1988 and a sampling of brands from today.

Jim Johnson, AIA
Founding principal, Johnson Nathan Strohe, Denver

The hotel at Dairy Block will be an independent offering that is part of a greater synergistic mixed-use project.