

CORONAVIRUS COVERAGE



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# Touchless Elevators And No Buffets: How The Coronavirus May Change Hotels

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A rendering of the Raffles Boston Back Bay Hotel & Residences, set to open in 2022 (Courtesy of The Architectural Team Inc.)

Massachusetts hotels could reopen to the general public as soon as Monday, if the state keeps making progress on its coronavirus recovery plan. But things will be different whenever bookings resume.

Guests will have to wear masks in lobbies. They shouldn't expect valets to park their cars. And they can forget about breakfast buffets.

The hospitality industry is preparing for these immediate changes, as well as some that may linger for years.

When a construction crew broke ground last fall on the Raffles luxury hotel in Boston's Back Bay, developers used words like "glamour," "style" and "oasis." Now, "We're focused on: How do we create the healthiest building in Boston?" said Gary Saunders, chairman of the Saunders Hotel Group.

Saunders still wants the Raffles hotel to feel deluxe when it opens in 2022, and he hopes the coronavirus will be well under control by then. Nevertheless, he's paying extra attention to features that used to seem mundane — like elevators.

"How do we have true touchless elevators?" Saunders said. "What kind of technology will be proven and tested that will let people talk to an elevator or wave a proximity card, and it'll take them right to their floor?"

In a world that may remain hyper-vigilant about hygiene, an elevator that allows guests to bypass a potentially germ-coated button could be a desirable amenity — right up there with the spa, assuming people go back to one.

And then there's the HVAC system.

"We already had a fairly advanced fresh air system in the building, but what the COVID crisis has made us do is reexamine those systems again," said Jordan Warshaw, president of the Noannet Group, Saunders' development partner.

Warshaw said the building, which will also include restaurants and condominiums, will pump in even more fresh air than originally planned. And it will put the air that is recirculated through enhanced filtration.

Five-star ventilation hasn't historically ranked among fine dining and sumptuous decor on a hotel's list of attributes. But that may change, according to Warshaw.

"At some point, if there's another issue in the future, and we've got the cleanest air systems that are out there, we consider that to be a competitive advantage," he said.

Hotel workers won't complain about clean air, and many accept that duties may change or even disappear because of the coronavirus.

"Buffets, for example," said Carlos Aramayo, president of Unite Here Local 26, which represents thousands of hospitality workers in Greater Boston. "I don't think there should be buffets. I think it would be irresponsible, as the union, just to come out with kind of a pure labor position of, like, 'No, we're going to defend the work of the buffet attendant, come hell or high water.' "

But the union does worry some hotels could use the coronavirus as an excuse to take cost-cutting measures.

"Things like trying to eliminate stay-over housekeeping altogether and arguing that, 'Oh, it's safer for the guest and for the room attendant to not have the room attendant go in the room every day,' " Aramayo said.

In that scenario, housekeepers would clean rooms only between bookings, not during guests' stays. Though cleanings would be more intense, there could still be less work, overall, which may lead to housekeeping job cuts.

While such changes may be on the table, hotel operators ultimately have to give customers what they want, said Leora Lanz, who chairs the graduate program at Boston University's School of Hospitality Administration.

"I spoke recently to a hotel owner," Lanz said, "and he said to me, 'Our guests want room service brought to their rooms. They want the daily turndown; they don't want to wait between stays.' "

If that's the case, then the hotels of the future may not scrub away all the personal touches, even as they take scouring germs to the next level.

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