

INVESTMENT TODAY



THE ART OF HOTEL RENOVATION

This month's column is written by Jonathan C. Nebmer, AIA. He is president of Rockville, MD-based Development Consulting Services, which offers feasibility, design and construction consulting as well as total project management services to the hospitality industry.

As the number of major renovations increases, it becomes ever more important to manage and control the process. One reason for the increase is that many hotels built in the '70s and '80s need more than a facelift and can't compete with newer product.

Changing markets and trends also dictate the need to alter the size and/or type of facilities hotels offer. And, since financing for new hotels is getting scarcer and harder to justify, owners are turning their energy toward upgrades.

Renovation is the combination of technical ability, creativity, patience and, above all, adaptability. All renovations involve dealing with conditions and constraints that affect schedule, budget and design. Schedule and cost contingencies must be significantly increased for a renovation planner to prepare for the unknown. Unlike most new construction, substantial demolition usually must be performed, which creates its own set of problems.

The key is to remain flexible and adaptable. Creativity is essential, not only in the design sense, but also in solving operational, cost and scheduling requirements. If the hotel stays open during renovation, there will be disruption of services and inconvenience to guests and staff. It may be necessary to create temporary facilities while relocating essential parts of the operation.

In regard to day-to-day operation of a hotel under renovation, the biggest headaches for management are physical disruption by construction activities, noise and interruption of utilities. Disruption caused by construction can be minimized by phasing the project: In many cases, guestroom floors or separate wings can be completed in stages to isolate construction from guests. The downside of such a schedule is it takes extra time, but in many cases, the only alternative is to close the hotel.

Noise is tougher. It comes in several varieties, most notably airborne and

structure-borne. Noise can travel a great distance through structures and pipes within a hotel, making it hard to separate guests from this construction byproduct.

During major renovations, it's not unusual to require that the water, heat, light—perhaps all utilities—be shut down for several hours at a time. The contractor and operator must have adequate contingency plans for such shutdowns. Hold a coordination meeting before the shutdown to ensure proper scheduling and that all materials are on site before work starts.

If the shutdown is supposed to take two hours, plan on four. If it affects heat, air-conditioning or hot water, plan enough time to reheat or cool the affected areas after the utilities come back on line. Find out how long it takes to get hot water back to the guestrooms after shutdown of the hot water system; few things annoy guests more than waking up to cold water.

It's important to react effectively, but proper care should be taken to plan in advance. The design team should be selected for excellence and expertise in hotel design and its experience in renovations and its ability to recognize problems before they grow. It must know how to provide details that fit with existing conditions rather than work against them. Make sure the team has a clear understanding of the scope of the project and the market for which it is designing.

The same criteria hold true for the contractor or construction manager. An experienced construction firm will provide valuable insight into coordination, budget and schedule. Arbitrarily accepting a low bid from a contractor inexperienced in hotel renovation can be disastrous in the long run.

Find out what local authorities will allow in regard to occupancy during construction. Will they issue separate permits that would allow you to phase the project? How will life safety systems be affected?

While some renovations have proven frustrating, costly and ruinous, they don't have to be that way. By anticipating potential obstacles, preparing for the unexpected and properly budgeting, planning and scheduling, renovation can be a successful, exciting rebirth for an aging hotel.

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