



# WORKS OF ART: AESTHETIC AMBITIONS IN DESIGN HOTELS

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes a genre of hotels that has grown substantially the latest decades: namely one that includes hotels that go under names such as design hotels, boutique hotels, or “contemporary” hotels. It presents elements of the transnational discourse of this genre and shows how these are translated, materialized and localized. Individual hotels are used as illustrative examples of how discursively formed visions and ambitions are materialized and how identity claims are aesthetically communicated. The paper demonstrates how artifacts, employees and visitors are regarded as key components in an aesthetic communication with clear references to the transnational discourse. By focusing on discursive practices and their materialization in hotels, the paper describes and theorizes the way hotels seek to discursively conceptualize themselves as individual establishments that belong to the transnational hotel genre. The paper ends with a discussion of how the hotels, through their aesthetic communication, mobilize a conformist transnational identity discourse advocating singularity and uniqueness. **Keywords:** design hotels, boutique hotels, aesthetics, aesthetic communication, identity. © 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## INTRODUCTION: DESIGN HOTELS

In the lobby of Nordic Light Hotel in Stockholm, the atmosphere is strikingly stylish. No expenses seem to have been spared to create a light and clean environment. The noise from the traffic is hardly discernable even though the hotel is located at a busy street right by the central station. It is a four star hotel, more expensive than hotels in the same category in the city, and has 175 rooms. The ceiling is high; the lighting, which is re-arranged on a monthly basis, is dramatic, and the floor is shiny. Employees are all dressed in white—the required color uniform for the moment. Nordic Light Hotel is a member of the group “Design Hotels” which:

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“...represents and markets a curated selection of more than 200 independent hotels in over 40 countries across the globe. More than a collection of hotels, the company is a collection of stories. Each property reflects the ideas of a visionary hotelier, an “Original,” someone with a passion for genuine hospitality and cultural authenticity, for thought-provoking design and groundbreaking architecture. All “Originals” stand for the individual, aesthetic and service-driven experiences that their hotels provide.”

([http://corporate.designhotels.com/about\\_design\\_hotels](http://corporate.designhotels.com/about_design_hotels))

The group “Design Hotels” was launched in the early 1990s. The group coordinates individual hoteliers and has a set of criteria for including hotels that fulfill the group’s requirements of being extraordinary, culturally authentic, having thought-provoking design and revolutionary architecture. Even though the individual hotels are presented as different from each other, original in their own right and highly individualistic, they are still grouped together. This seems to become possible through the use of language from the art world: the group is a “collection” of hotels; it curates and represents. An appropriate metaphor is that the hotels in themselves are to be seen as independent works of art, and the Design Hotel group serves as a gallery: coordinating, representing, and administrating.

Nordic Light Hotel in Stockholm is one of the group’s 200 members. The press material from the Stockholm hotel shows that it has ambitions to speak to the senses, to create emotions and to be close to the frontiers of fashion and trends:

“Accessibility, design and care. That’s our methods. We are accessible in the soul and in the geography. We create experiences for all senses. We are people who love people. We are an arena for trends and new ideas. We see function, form and people as a whole.” (Press material, Nordic Light Hotel)

The hotel prides itself with having two full time employees with job descriptions they state most hotels do not have. The first position is the *Full-time Designer*. She has the overarching aesthetic responsibility for the hotel, and is in charge of the guidelines for all procurement. Guidelines include everything from furniture and textiles to binders and paper clips. The hotel management finds the full-time designer to be of crucial strategic importance for maintaining the high service concept and the consistency of the hotel brand. One of the crucial tasks for the full-time designer is to function as a controller, a “concept police”, as one of the managers puts it. Furnishings tend to be chipped, floorings tend to be scratched, walls tend to be blemished and surfaces tend to be stained. As the hotel constantly deteriorates, the full-time designer needs to identify areas where repairs and improvements need to be made. “This hotel is extremely vulnerable,” as one of the managers puts it. He clarifies by stating that Nordic Light Hotel aims for aesthetic perfection. If physical deterioration is allowed to start, the image and brand will accordingly start to decay.

The holder of the second position, the *Guest Experience Manager*, is concerned with aesthetics within service issues, ranging from how the

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