

The Hotel Yearbook 2023  
The Uncertainty New Normal



HY8



**It's time for hotels  
to build 'places'  
rather than  
'spaces'**

**Andi Davids**

*Global Strategic Business Director at Bulletproof*

## Synopsis

Andi Davids at [Bulletproof](#) argues that hotels are often considered "non-places", spaces of transience and impermanence where people remain anonymous and interactions are mostly transactional, which does not inspire brand recognition, affinity, and loyalty. They suggest that the hospitality industry has a unique opportunity to rearticulate their market relevance by offering more meaningful travel experiences in more memorable places, in order to drive brand recognition and loyalty as consumer's fatigue with mass-produced travel and the rise of Airbnb.

Ever heard of a 'non-place'? If not, it's time to take note. Because the hotel industry is filled with them. And they might just be the reason hotels aren't filled with more people.

First coined in the mid-90s by French anthropologist Marc Augé, a 'non-place' is a space of transience and impermanence, where humans remain largely anonymous, and interactions are mostly transactional.

It's not a leap to see why hotels are prime non-places (alongside others – airports, service stations, shopping malls, for example). Guests pass through. They don't stay long. And they're known primarily by their room number. In short, not the best recipe for inspiring brand recognition, affinity, and loyalty.

'Places', in contrast, are meaningful spaces that empower individuals' identities and offer people the opportunity to meet and share social references. Things any industry expert will tell you are key to building brand love.

## A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

It's a pivotal moment for hospitality brands. As demand increases, hotels face three key challenges.

First, they need to rearticulate their market relevance in a landscape that's vastly changed. Consumers' fatigue with mass-produced travel is one of the key factors that led to the rise of Airbnb. In fact, Airbnb's positioning - 'belong anywhere' - was in direct opposition to the idea of non-places. You could have more authentic experiences, feel a part of the local community, and get the kind of travel credibility usually reserved for those with dog-eared passports.

But Airbnb's rapid commercialisation means it now suffers some of the same afflictions as hotels previously: [impersonal and largely interchangeable experiences, at exorbitant prices](#). For the first time in years, hotels are uniquely positioned to be the antidote to this.

Second, with 700 million people predicted to book travel digitally by 2023, hotels will need to drive brand recognition both online and in-person.

And finally, the pandemic's wind down has released a pent-up desire to travel, but cost-of-living rises mean people are seeking less risk and greater value (as in, 'money well spent'). To drive loyalty in the face of price sensitivity, hotels need to foster brand resonance - ultimately, offering more meaningful travel experiences in more memorable places.

Considering the above, it's the perfect time for a hotel renaissance. The key? Think 'places', not 'spaces'. Three characteristics – identity, relations and history – can help you do so.

## MAKE PEOPLE FEEL SEEN

Identities are rooted in places from birth. Our birthplace is on our birth certificates, after all. And as we go through life, the places we're associated with become part of our personal narrative, communicating something fundamental about us to the outside world.

Non-places, however, aren't a reflection of the self but an abstraction of it. They homogenise individuals into 'guests', and who you are and how you define yourself is only relevant in transactional moments.

The first way to combat this is to know who you're targeting. It doesn't matter if it's budget-conscious families, high-flying business travellers, or culture vultures. Craft a brand that reflects guests' identities. Create experiences that make them feel valued. Curate environments that reflect their attitude and character. Essentially, design a place in which they can naturally see themselves, and one where they'll naturally want other people to see them.

The Michelberger in Berlin, for example, has turned itself into a destination in its own right, with a thriving community space capturing the youthful, creative spirit of the Friedrichshain district. That sense of fandom doesn't just have to be about what's hip and cool – it's about cultivating a community of people that feel like they belong.

And remember, status doesn't always come from exclusivity or luxury. Depending on who you target, it may come from just the opposite. The key is making people feel like they're seen, understood, and 'in the know'.

Another way to tackle the identity challenge is to create a more bespoke offer. Augé's research was written in the early days of the internet, long before the word 'personalisation' had entered the common vernacular. But with modern technology and a glut of data, we're now in an incredible position to provide a more personalised experience. Get to know your guests. Greet them using their name whenever possible. Ensure their bedding, toiletries and level of service reflect their tastes. And flip the notion of loyalty programmes. Show loyalty to your guests rather than simply rewarding them for showing loyalty to you.

## HELP PEOPLE CONNECT

The second characteristic of a non-place is relations. In places, people form a community and have a collective identity (think 'Brits', 'Londoners', 'Arsenal Fans'). All share a common language, implied behaviours and known rituals.

Non-places, meanwhile, mediate a whole mass of relations in a transactional way. They communicate through generic messages ('we apologise for the inconvenience'), impose codes ('please consider reusing your towels') and enforce rules ('we require our guests to check out by 11am').

So, a key goal in turning non-places into places is to remove the focus on transactionality. Again, there's a great opportunity for technology to help. Apps can make the experience seamless. Beyond that, simply focusing on the way your brand communicates and behaves can create a feeling of conviviality. Look at your tone of voice. Is it personal? Better yet, is it ownable?

And it's not just guests' relations with the hotel that matter, but with each other. Provide opportunities for people to meet, connect and create. Build communities. Offer activities related to the interests of the people who frequent your hotel. Create mixed-use spaces. Rather than a 'business centre' consisting of a computer and printer in the corner of a lobby, create co-working space. Name gyms, spas, and restaurants, to give a sense of place within a place. Better yet, create an ecosystem of branded services, like Soho House, with hotels, clubs, spas, workspaces and even home goods.

And finally, turn your brand into a badge of honour. Build meaning into your distinctive brand assets. Make them recognisable, covetable and easy to share.

### LET PEOPLE LIVE HISTORY

The final characteristic of a non-place – history – is particularly important when it comes to placemaking.

I'm not talking about simply putting up archive images on the wall with a timeline. In non-places, history becomes something to observe rather than be part of. In places, it's about helping guests live it. Letting them become part of it. And creating experiences that establish a shared narrative for all.

You can do this by creating signature sensory experiences, ones that only happen at your hotel. That could mean multi-sensory brands, immersive environments, or unique displays. Take the TWA at JFK airport. From the custom font, to the spot-on replica of Howard Hughes' 1962 office, to the 60s tunes playing in the Runway Chalet; it's a feast for the senses that transports guests back in time to the golden era of air travel.

At the other end of the scale, it can be as simple as offering a signature scent – like Marriott Westin's White Tea. An olfactory memento that transports them right back to their time in the hotel. It's proved so popular and evocative, that guests can now buy it as a home fragrance.

### MAKE SPACE FOR 'PLACE'

Whether you add these to your to-do list ultimately depends on your strategy – is it about getting as many people in and out as quickly as possible? Or is it about creating more meaningful experiences? Whether just the lobby, or the whole hotel, every hospitality brand can benefit from 'place' making.

Tackling non-places within the hotel industry is a huge opportunity for hospitality brands to drive growth, standout, and fandom. Guests are increasingly looking to experience places. As an industry, we owe it to them to deliver them, in the true sense of Augé's definition.



#### Andi Davids — Global Strategic Business Director at Bulletproof

Andi Davids is Global Strategic Business Director at Bulletproof, an independent brand creative agency with studios in London, New York, Singapore, Amsterdam, Sydney and Shanghai. Andi loves to unpack the way that people form meaning in their lives, elevating brands beyond recognisable identities to dynamic reflections of human experience. She's used this approach with some of the world's most iconic brands including Deloitte, Heinz, Mars, PepsiCo, the UK Government, and the United Nations. Combining consultancy with academia, Andi is a guest lecturer at Cambridge University, leading the latest discussions on media, marketing, semiotics and psychology of communications.

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