



## Positive returns from ‘negative’ space

With hotel spa finances now rigorously scrutinised, Anne McCall Wilson says the key to increasing profit is to get the maximum experience out of every square metre

**B**ack in the early-2000s a frenzy of hotel spa investment fueled the creation of ever bigger, ever bolder facilities that promised incremental rates for hotels and soaring real estate returns for developers. Loose discussions took place about spa returns on investment, but in the absence of industry benchmarks and in a booming economy, such projects often lacked the financial discipline that might have been required for a standalone business.

This all changed, of course, with the economic downturn, as the hotel industry and its investors were forced to get serious about spa finances. Tight competition for capital necessitated right-size design and maximum profits. While this led to many well conceived ventures, last-minute value engineering all too often resulted in the creation of small, basic, unimaginative amenity spas.

### The art of optimisation

To create a hotel spa with optimum performance potential requires a balance of art and science; they must be inspirational places of wellbeing, created and run according to a formula which satisfies both guests and investors. As far as spa metrics go, I am a believer in ‘maximum experience per square metre.’ Asking whether an operational decision or design concept maximises the guest experience within the space or budget available puts a sharp focus on issues of investment, profit and customer satisfaction.

When designing a spa, greater attention and creativity tends to be put into the ‘hero’ locations such as thermal and wet areas. However, to maximise the spa experience per square metre, such things as music, visual arts and scent – all of which add to the quality of experience – must be taken into account. These lie in what artists refer to as ‘negative’ space – the area around the focal objects – but used creatively, they can bring positive results, adding new dimension and depth to the bigger picture.

The flow of space that links and frames the main attractions and the siting of access and service points offer high value, no-cost opportunities to maximise the guest’s use of a spa. Reception areas can transform retailing into entertainment with mini-services and passionate, knowledgeable staff guiding guests through the spa’s services and benefits. Placed in a higher traffic location, the entrance to a hotel spa can be transformed into a place for morning coffee and an express treatment, or afternoon Champagne and a make-up touch-up with a group of friends.

Other opportunities to boost revenue lie in the management of spa revenue itself, as well as in controlling the flow within the spa; for example, booking treatments every 15 minutes can reduce congestion in reception areas and lounges while maintaining profitability within a smaller space.

Albert Einstein said “creativity is intelligence having fun” and clever spa businesses must be creative to inspire wellbeing and achieve success. ●●●●●

**Above, from left:** Sociable relaxation at Willow Stream Spa, Fairmont Pacific Rim, Vancouver; inspirational wellbeing at Willow Stream, Fairmont Mayakoba, Mexico



### Meet the expert

Anne McCall Wilson is vice-president of spas at Fairmont Raffles Hotels International. As a spa developer she has created brands such as Fairmont’s Willow Stream Spas, Swissôtel’s Pürovel Spa & Sport and Raffles Spas. She sits on the board of directors for the Global Spa & Wellness Summit.

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