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Consultancy

Backing up the house

*Not much has been written about the critical aspects of design and challenges involved in facility planning for back of the house. However, **Sunil Khanna** of Hotel Consult Orient believes that the scope for facility planning is growing. By **Sanjeev Bhar***



Sunil Khanna

Back of the house designing is a vital segment that requires much planning right till the last stage. According to Sunil Khanna of Hotel Consult Orient, back of the house designing is performed under critical constraints. "One can change and refurbish the front of the house, its décor and design over a period of few years. But that's not the case with the back portion; it has to be clinically precise and therefore, a lot more depth goes into planning and

designing back of the house. Back of house designs are worked under constraints where flow and design can't be changed again and again," he explains. The back of the house has to take into consideration the working condition of the staff.

While designing the back of the house, one has to take into account the staff cafeteria, HVAC ducts, drainage system, floor plan, kitchen equipment and gadgets to be installed, etc. Space has to be utilised optimally for a smooth flow of work. Unfortunately, the back area is regarded as non-revenue generation space. "I believe that the back space relates indirectly to revenue generation as it directly relates to staff. If staff is not taken care of, then employee turnover will be high leading to inefficiency of operation," Khanna explains.

Recognition for consultants

Earlier consultancy for back of the house, i.e. facility planning, had limited scope but over the last decade it has shown progress. Khanna states, "Now facility planners are working in tandem with architects right from the drawing board stage of planning a hotel property. Even international chains are taking keen interest in aligning with Indian consultants as we understand the environment and requisite for a proper facility that is needed under the desired conditions." Consultancy for facility planning is an evolved concept in the west. Earlier foreign brands launching their brands in India outsourced the facility planning jobs by importing knowledge to India. But now, there has been a slight perception change. The knowledge of the local market plays a key role in defining the facility because that is not restricted to space planning and has to take into account equipment selection too, he adds. "It is heartening that Indian consultants (even though there are a few in the business) are being



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recognised of their competency, knowledge and ability to provide service that suits their branding and mandatory standard needs," he says. It is also true that consultants are now pro-developers and help them get the best of attributes in a property offering all possible cost effective facilities. In India, Khanna says, it is now that facility planning consultancy is gaining confidence from the developers. "But they are not going just by reputations. They ask questions as they are learning with each project," he opines.

Does he think the economic meltdown has had any impact on consultancy directly or indirectly? "Recession only slowed down the process of development. But Indian hotel developments are booming and therefore, it has done a lot of good for the consultants in facility planning. Here consultancy for facility planning was still at a nascent stage five years back. The last three years have fared exceptionally well," he says.

Facility planning takes care of critical concerns and takes on a technical approach keeping space in mind under a designated budget. Due to the challenges it offers, GMs, chefs are joining firms as consultants to pass on their professional knowledge back to the industry. "It offers professionals from the hotel sector a scope to develop different sets of skills where the key desire has to be on learning. Also, the industry is kinder to the professionals who have a background in hotels.

They have great opportunity to use their knowledge skill sets," he explains.

Evolving nature of consultancy

That a mix of professionals are entering into the facility planning field has helped take consultancy to another level. Hotel Consult Orient in this regard is expecting a growth. "I feel that the scope for facility planner is going in the right direction. It is also true that there are countable numbers of such firms in India that offer good planning for back of the house," Khanna says adding, "Today we have 16 associate and principal consultants. Each individual has a target to achieve. In fact, earlier we only did big five star projects and international standalone restaurant projects. Now we are doing three, four star projects in the country and have added restaurants too into our fold to reach out to wider audience pan-India, as this market is growing." The consultancy business opportunity in terms of capital worth should be around Rs 50 crores, Khanna perceives and says that this segment is growing at 20 per cent per annum. "Our target is to grow by 50 per cent per annum to increase concentrating only on back of house and show kitchens (which is in front of house)," he informs.

The company's growth focus is very much India centric but it is also looking forward to exporting its expertise to third world markets. "We actually did an Indian restaurant Spice Bazaar at the Venetian Macau Resort Hotel. In all, we have done 15 restaurants outside India, and would look at hotel projects outside for Indian owners," sums up Khanna.