

An installation at
Opposite House
in Beijing

The art of BRANDING

FROM PERMANENT COLLECTIONS TO TEMPORARY INSTALLATIONS, ART PROGRAMS BUILD AWARENESS AND CREATE UNIQUE EXPERIENCES

Contributed BY DEBBIE CARLSON

Creating an art program for your hotel goes beyond hanging pretty pictures. Executing an art program that works takes vision and planning.

Some hotels are using art programs as way to authentically reflect their identity or philosophy and to attract a certain type of guest who looks beyond traditional hotel amenities. And much-desired publicity doesn't hurt, either, if guests are encouraged or inspired to post images on social media.

"People who come to stay with us and eat with us, their own advocacy is by far the most effective way, in our view, of spreading the brand," says Toby Smith, managing director at Swire Hotels, which manages small luxury hotels in Hong Kong and mainland China. Swire completed its first art program, the House Collective Art Programme, in 2018.

The program featured a multidisciplinary artist using a single theme to connect four of Swire's hotels to the city where it's located and to make connections to the hotel itself. Each property has a different name — Upper

House, Middle House, Temple House and Opposite House — so it's not obvious even to guests that there is more than one hotel in the collective.

"We're not a big brand, we don't have the global reach. We felt it helped put us on the map a bit more," Smith says.

Jonathan Plutzik, owner of The Betsy in Miami Beach, runs several arts programs including a writer's residency, curated music program and an extensive, respected photography collection.

The family-run hotel wanted to highlight Miami's reputation as an arts and culture destination, and many of its luxury and corporate guests choose The Betsy specifically for its arts program.

"Everybody's looking for a differentiated experience. They don't want a predictable, windowless box," Plutzik says.

FOUND OBJECTS

Soneva Fushi in the Maldives started its art program as part of the hotel's Waste to Wealth program to recycle items, says Evan

Venaas, the hotel's chief glass specialist. Soneva Art and Glass creates items for Soneva properties by recycling the hotel's glass bottles and containers, allowing both guests and visiting artists to create works in the hotel's studio. Venaas says the art program supports sustainability and is an opportunity to talk to patrons about larger issues related to material use and intentional design that feeds new processes and eliminates waste.

There are costs to consider, including artist pay, insurance and logistics. A hot-glass studio is expensive to run, Venaas says, with supplies, fuel and staffing, but the offset is the marketing value and the return on the donations of work to the permanent art collection, which he says is valued at "well over" US\$1 million. The art is for sale, and the hotel shares revenue on a standard gallery agreement.

Hotels that want to start an arts program should figure out their objective and a potential project's scale, Smith says. Reach out to local artist communities and



Art glass made at Soneva Fushi

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JONATHAN PLUTZIK, THE BETSY

interview artists to see if their work fits with the hotel’s goals.

Have one person in charge of putting together a program who can oversee the project, Swire’s Smith suggests. General managers should inquire within the staff if there’s interest in helping direct the program, Plutzik says.

“The great thing about the hospitality industry is you may have someone on staff who went to art school and would be so excited about going to do that outreach to community,” he says.

Hotels that want to create a permanent collection should consider specializing in a particular type of art. The Betsy focuses on photography for its visual arts program, which now has nearly 500 pieces in public and guest areas. “It’s a very deep commitment to the space, and the best artists and galleries respect us and therefore want to partner more because we have a dedication to their particular art form,” he says.

HOW PROVOCATIVE?

The Hotel Chicago West Loop in Chicago

uses the 14 urban-art-style murals in guest rooms to attract a younger, art-loving crowd to the hotel, which is located near a university, medical district and sports and concert venue, says General Manager Jean-Luc Laramie. The murals are open to the public if the hotel is not full.

Hotels that lease property and want to install that type of permanent art should be sure to get permission from the building’s owner, Laramie says.

Art can be provocative, so hotels need to consider the impact the art will have not only on guests, but the community. Case in point: In 2018, a marine sculpture commissioned by the Fairmont Maldives Sirru Fen Fushi resort was demolished when it was deemed anti-Islamic for its depiction of human figures in art.

Laramie, who commissioned muralists to decorate guest rooms with a Chicago theme, says one of the guidelines was to not paint anything politically charged.

“At the end of the day, we are a hotel and we have to run a business. All of the artists were very much understanding,” he says.

WORKING WITH AN ARTIST

Luis Ramirez, a Chicago graffiti artist who paints murals under the name Asend, worked with Hotel Chicago West Loop in its first mural commissions and recently won a competition to paint a four-story mural on the hotel’s outer wall this year.

He recommends being open to collaborate with artists when considering decorative projects. “Artists can offer a different point of view on things. Many are trained in color theory or composition. We can take (a hotel’s) idea and perfect it,” he says.

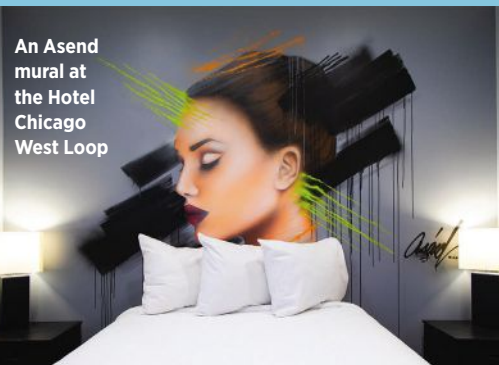
Guidelines are fine, but allow room for creativity, too, he recommends, and be flexible around deadlines.

When signing contracts, specify whether the artist or hotel owns the rights to the work, or whether those rights are shared.

And look for ways to use the art beyond simply displaying it. Hotel Chicago printed images of Asend’s first mural on postcards and put it on hotel beds for guests. “It keeps the artwork going,” Ramirez says.

Hotels can also arrange to sell artwork outright or prints, which opens up another sales avenue.

“Prints are very attractive because an individual piece can cost US\$20,000, but you can sell a print for US\$100, and people can afford that,” he says.



An Asend mural at the Hotel Chicago West Loop