

Spas Mean Business

Even as the spa industry thrives, designing for profit is more important than ever

BY JESSICA DOWNEY

RThe \$40 billion plus spa industry is feeling bubbly—it's had two decades of double-digit growth, and today consumers have wellness and healthy living on their minds. Spas are becoming a remedy to the fast pace of modern life. For hotels and resorts, this means spas can do more than just raise occupancy—they can be profit centers.

"The whole [lodging] industry has found religion with spas," says Judy Singer, president and co-owner of Health Fitness Dynamics. "The hotel spas have been a bit slower in gaining momentum, but they are on an up-swing."

Although hotel developers have been including spas in

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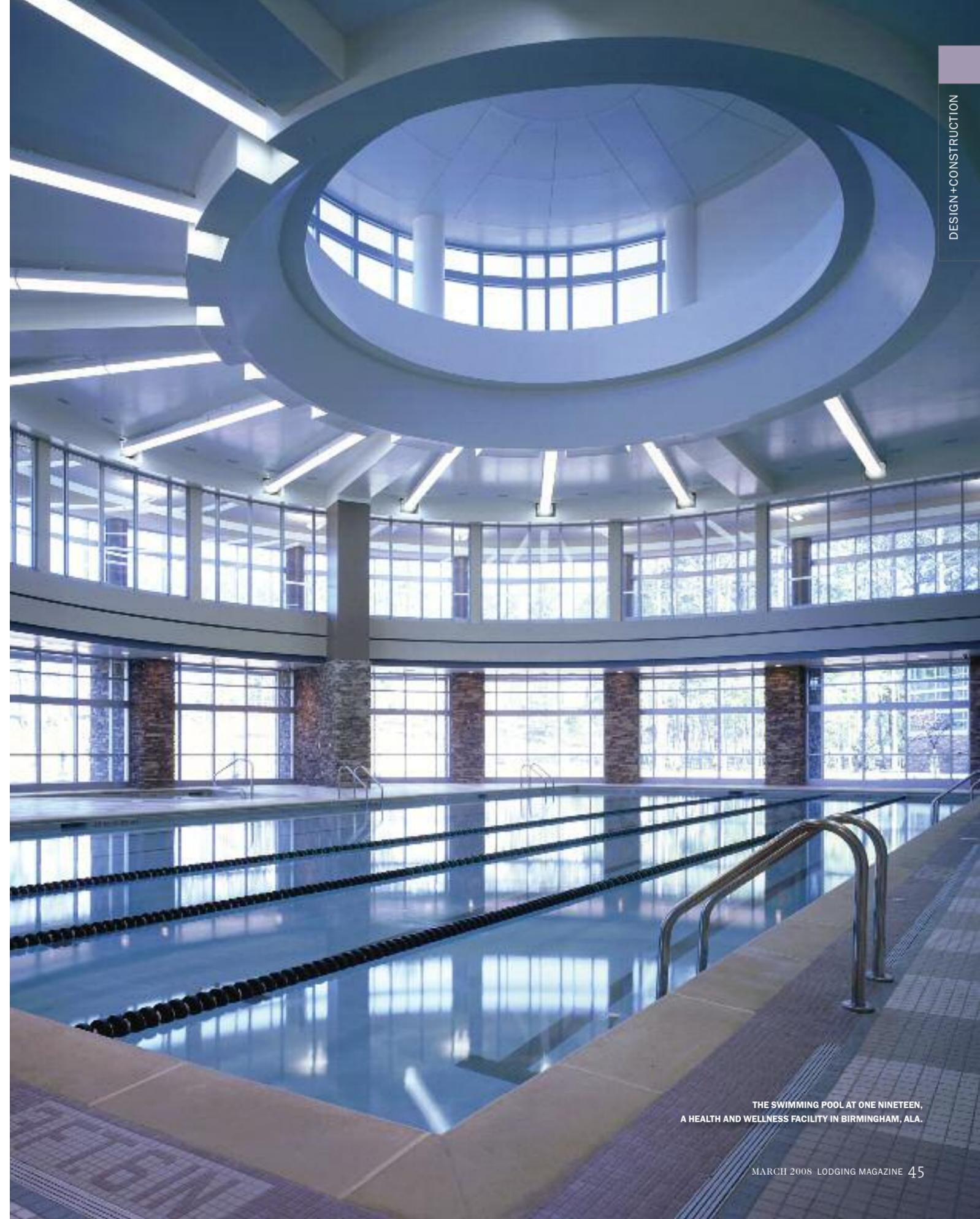
the plans for 25 years, Singer says they are just now starting to recognize that spas can be profit centers if they're built and run well. "Twenty-five years ago developers thought they'd lose money on the spas, but they helped them stay competitive," she explains. "Now they are seeing spas can bring in profit. Developers feel if they don't have a spa they've lost their competitive edge."

With so many spas being built and upgraded to capitalize on the momentum, new trends are emerging in design and operations to reflect guests with higher expectations who desire a unique experience. Spas are becoming more architecturally elaborate and innovative, and just in time to meet the demand.

AWAY WITH TRADITION

One of the most significant changes in spa design is the shift away from a clinical look, says James Carry, principal in charge and design director of Wilson Associates, the company that designed the Four Seasons Hong Kong spa. "People used to think of spas like a medical treatment or therapy rooms, so sometimes they tended to feel a little like doctors offices. The treatment rooms were dark spaces with no windows and a table in the rooms. They were often very clinical experiences," he says. "If you went into a Four Seasons or Ritz Carlton 10 or 15 years ago, you could almost hang 'doctor' on the wall. Now the spaces are amazing."

Carry, whose projects include the Atlantis II Resort & Casino on Paradise Island in the Bahamas and the Gaylord Texan Hotel in Grapevine, Texas, says the reception areas and lobbies—like hotel lobbies—are becoming grand architectural spaces with mood lighting, ceiling design and detail and retail counters. But unlike the early days of spas, the magnificent design doesn't end there. "In the spa business there is tremendous amount of money to be made. People expect a totally sensory involvement and creative treatment rooms," Carry explains. "Since you spend a lot of time laying on your stomach in the treatment rooms we're doing a tile koi pond on the floor in one of our spas."



THE SWIMMING POOL AT ONE NINETEEN, A HEALTH AND WELLNESS FACILITY IN BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

Many of the new concepts Carry describes are designed to make the guest feel more pampered. "One of the things we are doing is getting away from traditional men's and women's dressing rooms. We're developing treatment suites. You are escorted to a suite, which is like a hotel guestroom. Everything you need is there: a treatment table, dressing area, plunge pool for wet treatments and a chair for pedicures, manicures, facials," he says. "You really are catered to as an individual, so whatever you choose off the spa menu can be done there. You're not walking down the hall in a robe."

The more elaborate and detail-oriented spa design and architecture can be tied to a shift in thinking and spending on the part of many owners and developers, Carry says. "It's just like being a 'hotel restaurant' versus an amazing restaurant. Now hotels realize if we have an amazing restaurant with amazing food we can make amazing money. It's the same in the spas."

But spending money isn't nearly as important as spending it well in planning a spa that will be well run and profitable, says Ron Lustig, principal design architect of Earl Swenson Associates (ESA). "Everyone is looking at ways to make spas more efficient in terms of back of the house and maintenance costs." Technology is helping make that happen, he says. "Twelve years ago there was a dimmer panel, a thermostat and someone might light a candle. Now it's becoming more controlled where we have light therapies, sound therapies—everything is becoming more integrated on one control panel. The whole



WILSON ASSOCIATES' DESIGN OF THE HAMMAM SPA, ROYAL MIRAGE PHASE II IS INTENDED TO BREAK AWAY FROM THE FEEL OF A CLINIC.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE ROYAL MIRAGE, DUBAI

environment is becoming more sophisticated and more electronically controlled."

As much as technology can help spas run more efficiently, Singer says architects still need to pay more attention to the back of the house and areas the guest doesn't actually see. "You typically see attendants rolling laundry through the facility. There should be a back-of-house laundry room so the guest never sees that part. It's like a stage," she says. "But that often gets sacrificed because

that's space the developer doesn't think will ever be seen by the guest."

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

The spa industry is on the upswing, but Singer says even successful spas struggle with occupancy during the weekdays. "Spa treatment rooms are utilized on average about 35 percent of the time," she says. "If a hotel was operating at 35 percent occupancy, they'd close."

One way to build the weekly occupancy is to cater to men

more, she says. "The male market has grown a little bit, like a few percentage points in the last few years (35 percent are men). But that's still so low when you consider the male grooming market is a \$9 or \$11 billion business," Singer says. "Men are concerned about how they look, too. Everyone knows that women are the majority of the market so we tend to plan for them. But people are starting to do more gender neutral or making areas more club like."

Hotel spas also need to be

Spa Faux Pas

Spa consultant Judy Singer gives the eight most common blunders in spa design.

- **Copycatting other spas**...taking a tour and figuring if a lot of spas have certain features, it must be something you need to include
- **Not being market-driven and trend-sensitive**...need to understand your guests and what they want rather than what you want.
- **Asking architects to do a facility program** or space planning when they don't fully understand spa operations
- **Asking vendors to plan space** in return for them providing the equipment...they may over sell, they may promote hard to sell or expensive equipment, they may promote the newest trendy equipment that the market does not want, etc.
- **Not separating the active from the passive areas.** Spas are meant to be quiet enclaves or cocoons. It is hard to mix the high activity and energy of a fitness center with the serenity and tranquility of a spa.
- **Not having outside 24/7 access** to fitness areas and making sure fitness areas have their own separate water closets. It is not always appropriate or desirable for high-energy fitness guests to be in the tranquil spa locker rooms and lounges.
- **Over or under-sizing the spa** because they do not understand the in-house market, they depend too much on the local day spa market,

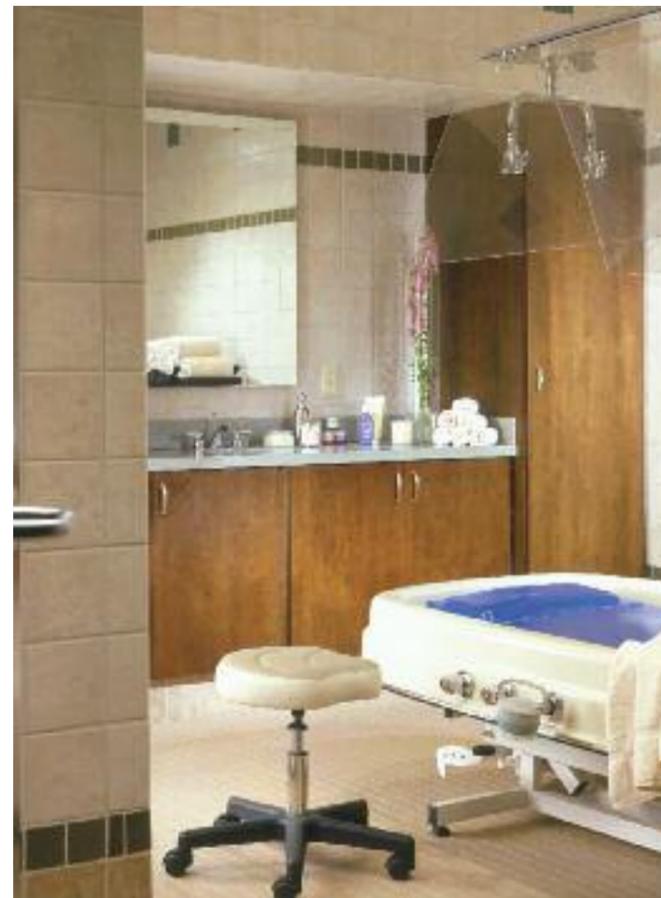
they believe members will take services versus using the facilities or fitness, not understanding the challenges in finding staff, (most spas operate at 35 percent treatment room utilization partially because they can not find enough staff to provide treatments so the rooms go empty.)

■ Improper traffic flow which causes...

- **Stress for the guests** because they have to think too much in terms of how to get from one place to another...the flow does not make sense, it is not logical in terms of the sequence of how the guests actually use a spa
- **Operational inefficiencies** for the staff if the prep room and laundry are not nearby
- **Too many staff members to supervise** the area rather than having the staff be able to oversee multiple areas of the property, such as spa reception combined with retail areas. Payroll is typically the most costly operating expense for a spa business, so the facility needs to be planned in order to minimize the number of staff members but not the level of service.



THE MALLIOUHANA SPA IN ANGIILLA, BRITISH WEST INDIES



ONE NINETEEN'S SPA TREATMENT ROOM

more proactive in marketing. Spas just don't market themselves. The lodging industry is competing with the day spa industry. They have to be very proactive in marketing, and they have to have a better concept than their competitors," Singer explains. "Spas will continue to be built, but I have a fear that they will be underutilized if they don't do a better job with marketing. People will have to be very focused to understand their consumer and what time those consumers have."

But perhaps the most significant change the lodging industry could make to bring more consumers into the mix is to address pricing, Singer

says. "I get real concerned about the greed effect. Spas have always been built for the rich and the wealthy, but there's all of Middle America that needs a spa—they need the time away but they can't afford it. Spas need to be built that are affordable."

She suggests getting creative to open the doors to more consumers. Offer 30-minute "express massages." Or, if labor is too costly, Singer says hotels could build relaxation rooms with Brookstone furniture, aqua massages and soothing music.

Whatever creative means the hotel spas employ, it's clear they need to seize the opportunity to grow the bottom line and bring more people in their doors—before the moment passes. ■