

# The Big Story: Displays of towering ambition

Jill James

The screenshot shows a Windows Internet Explorer browser window displaying the Financial Times website. The page title is "The Big Story: Displays of towering ambition" by Jill James, published on September 13, 2010. The article discusses the hotel industry's focus on prestigious projects like the Burj Khalifa and the Galactic Suite during a recession. It features a sidebar with navigation links, a login section, and a subscription offer. A photo of a Hilton hotel is also visible.

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## The Big Story: Displays of towering ambition

By Jill James  
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Prestigious hotel projects remain a focus even as the industry suffers the effects of recession. The world's tallest hotel, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, thought to have cost more than \$1.5bn, opened in January, while away from planet Earth, the Galactic Suite, the first space hotel that promises a three-night space orbit, is planned for 2012.

These days, the arrival of every big new hotel is billed as an "icon" for the city in which it is built. However, a number do – or will – justify the hype and successfully refresh the image of a city, the company behind it or even the travel industry itself. The Marina Bay Sands hotel in Singapore – which at £4bn (\$6bn) is the world's most expensive hotel – made headlines around the world when it opened in June this year. Three months on, its long-term effects have yet to be felt, but there is no doubt of its visual impact – its three towers dominate the view from Singapore's downtown. Meanwhile the hotel's casino – the second that is permitted to operate in the country – has become a destination in itself, attracting 25,000 visitors daily.

Michael Wale, senior vice-president of Starwood Hotels and Resorts, one of the world's largest hotel companies, believes that a hotel should not just be designed to generate publicity, but to benefit its guests as well. Starwood often works with architects such as Frank Gehry, who designed the company's latest hotel in Spain, and Ricardo Bofill, responsible for the W Barcelona hotel, which opened last October.

"There are two kinds of 'super' hotel in my mind: the architecturally unique, such as the Yas Hotel in Abu Dhabi, and the no-expense-spared projects such as the Mardan Palace [in Turkey]," says Mr Wale.

"In an ever-competitive market, hoteliers and developers are seeking to distinguish themselves and make their mark," he adds. "In the current climate especially, some 'super' hotel projects can open to great fanfare, but it can take them time to find their market. This may be especially true for independent hotels. Brand affiliation is critical to driving early success, but above all, design must address the constantly changing needs of guests."

Advances in software look set to make life easier for business travellers. For example, guests have long used magnetic room keys but trials took place this summer using technology that will enable guests to access rooms by downloading an app to their smartphone.

A concept room at the Pullman Paris Bercy in Paris, designed by Natacha Froger,

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Advances in software look set to make life easier for business travellers. For example, guests have long used magnetic room keys but trials took place this summer using technology that will enable guests to access rooms by downloading an app to their smartphone.

A concept room at the Pullman Paris Bercy in Paris, designed by Natacha Froger, provides a glimpse of what might one day be the norm in all hotels. The door is unlocked using a mobile phone; window blinds descend at the touch of a button; the shower cubicle is made from a glass that turns from transparent to opaque and a "floating" television is seemingly suspended in midair.

Meanwhile some hotel groups, such as Accor, are working to develop smart cards. These could be used to check in automatically and to remember a guest's personal preferences (so your room will be ready-equipped with a soft pillow, a medium mattress, Earl Grey tea and a picture of Shane Williams on your screensaver, for example).

Developments in fields such as biometrics could help improve hotel security systems, while nanotechnology – a manufacturing technology – could see the development of "smart sheets" that help to control a guest's body temperature, and pillowcases that emit light when a guest reads in bed. It is simply a case of which hotel groups have the will – and the budgets – to make such concepts a part of hotel life.

While the economic downturn may have slowed such developments, and put back hotel openings (Singapore's Marina Bay Sands was delayed several months), there are signs of an upturn in the industry.

Jan Tissera, president of Travelclick International, provider of e-commerce services to the hotel industry, says that while virtually all hotels around the world have felt the impact of the financial crisis, there were encouraging signs in last year's final quarter, particularly in the Asia-Pacific market.

"We anticipate that intra-country tourism will accelerate through the rest of 2010," he says.

According to the biannual hotel survey conducted by Hogg Robinson Group (HRG), the hotel market in Europe and the US appears to be stabilising, as rates are either flat or only marginally down.

Meanwhile, the Middle East recorded the biggest rate decrease – in Abu Dhabi rates fell by 26 per cent, in sharp contrast to the 38 per cent growth in average rates recorded in the first half of 2009.

But ambitious projects in the United Arab Emirates are ploughing ahead. This year a Rocco Forte hotel opens in Abu Dhabi, with rooms designed by Olga Polizzi. Perhaps the most unusual development in the country was last November's opening of the 500-room Yas Hotel, straddling the Formula One racetrack.

In London, the most prominent opening is set to be the glass-clad, 190-room W Hotel in Leicester Square in February next year, on the site of the landmark Swiss Centre.

But this is small when compared with the Park Plaza Westminster Bridge, which opened this spring. Its 1,021 designer rooms, plus restaurants, bars, spa and pool, make it the capital's biggest new-build for years.