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The world's coolest hotels want to tell you a story

The latest design-driven hotels aim to immerse guests in a story or social movement, or transport them to another time



The Hotel Ulysses in the Mount Vernon neighborhood of Baltimore taps into the aesthetic of film writer/director John Waters. (Brett Wood)

A new niche of high-end hotels makes a big promise.

Unlike your run-of-the-mill boutique hotel, these properties aren't only about cool decor and on-site bars and restaurants. Through grander concepts and designs, they claim to immerse guests in a story or social movement, or even transport them to another time period.

Dream of joining Gertrude Stein's salons in early 20th-century Paris? That's the vibe on offer at the flamboyant Le Grand Mazarin in the city's Marais neighborhood. Wish you could live inside the campy aesthetic of cult-film writer/director John Waters? Check into Baltimore's Hotel Ulysses, one of a growing number of eccentric concepts from hospitality group Ash. Want your travel choices to align with your concern about climate change? The upcoming Six Senses Svart in Norway promises "an immersive and purpose-driven journey" in a spaceshiplike building designed to generate more energy than it uses.

These examples couldn't be more different from one another, and that's the point. But there is one thread that tends to connect them: the creators of such concepts frequently describe them as weaving a "story" or "narrative." So, we'll call them narrative hotels. They are built to stand out in an era in which corporate chains masquerade as boutiques and design trends are dictated by social media algorithms. A few fast-growing hospitality groups have even made the narrative concept key to their plans for global expansion. But that's where the plot gets complicated.

The challenge of too many stories

Stories based on a building's past are among the most common narratives that hotels spin. The luxuriously redesigned Hotel Chelsea, for example, fully embraces its pedigree as the former home of rock-and-roll legends. There are also narratives inspired by cultural figures and movements, like at Maison Proust in Paris, a hotel dedicated to its namesake literary giant. And then there are the mission-driven stories. Cases in point: D.C.'s "first activist hotel," the Eaton, which features a "Radical Library" in its lobby and has hosted protest song performances in its rooftop bar. And the city's feminist-inflected Hotel Zena, where you will encounter a huge portrait of Ruth Bader Ginsburg made of tampons.

But the most popular narratives are probably the ones pegged to location. These properties deploy design choices, event programs and culinary offerings intended to make them feel like an authentic part of the local experience. This has been the angle for many openings from Ennismore, the hospitality group behind the Hoxton and 25hours, chains that position themselves as hangouts for cool locals in the city's coolest neighborhoods.