



EXTENDED STAY LIMITED SERVICE

BY JOEL WARREN BARNA

COMBINED, THE TERMS SOUND LESS THAN INVITING. BUT IN THE 1990S, HOTELS OF THIS TYPE HAVE BECOME AMERICA'S HOTELS OF CHOICE.



Over the past five years, while urban planners have focused their attention on the city's inability to get a single new convention hotel built near the George R. Brown Convention Center, a fresh building type has quietly arisen to dominate the hospitality landscape in Houston. Perhaps because it has taken place on the city's fringes rather than in its center, this change has attracted little notice. But noticed or not, the change has been dramatic, with more hotel rooms being built in Houston during the last half decade than at any period since the 1960s.

According to PKF Consulting, which does the annual hotel report for the city of Houston, 118 new hotels, accounting for more than 26,000 rooms, have been built in the Houston area since 1994. They've sprung up like mushrooms on I-10, Beltway 8, I-45, US 290, and US 59, clustering at exits and filling up available space on feeder roads. All these new hotels have been one of two types, the limited-service hotel or the extended-stay hotel. Together, these two types represent a kind of building that didn't exist before about 1990. Not that there's no precedent for this sort of lodging: limited-service hotel and extended-stay hotel are in

fact explanatory terms for what would have once simply been called motels — informal lodging places with moderate room rates, limited (if any) dining facilities and public spaces, suburban locations, and easy, drive-up access.

The guest rooms of both these new hotel types are only subtly different from those built in previous decades. Limited-service hotels feature the tight bedroom-and-bathroom units that have always typified motels, with the difference that today's rooms are slightly longer in plan to accommodate a small desk with a telephone and extra phone jacks for hooking computers up to the Internet. In extended-stay hotels, on the other hand, a suite is formed by separating the bedroom from the work area, which has a small kitchen counter on one side and a small sitting room with a couch, a table and chairs, and a television on the other.

On the surface, it's a familiar motel-type arrangement. A major difference, however, stems from the changed psychological climate that surrounds travel these days: Where motels were traditionally organized around courtyards, with exterior entry to each guest room, limited-service and extended-stay hotels cluster their rooms on interior double-loaded corri-

dors and permit entry only through one or two points, to give the guests a greater sense of security. It's part of the overall landscape of threat we all inhabit.

With all its recent spate of construction, Houston has been a leading player in a national trend toward limited-service and extended-stay hotels. According to Professor Clinton Rappole of the University of Houston Conrad Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant management, since 1990 the only full-service hotels — those with full dining facilities, lots of public space for meetings and gatherings, big lobbies, and relatively high room rates — built have been in cities that are themselves tourist destinations, such as Orlando, San Antonio, and New York, or near the nation's theme parks.

But while new full-service hotels have been few and far between, the number of limited-stay and extended-stay hotels has exploded: In Houston, says PKF Consulting, the limited-stay and extended-stay rooms added since 1994 now account for 36 percent of the city's available hotel space. Nationwide, industry analysts report, the upsurge in limited-stay and extended-stay hotels has led to a

While downtown hotels have been few and far between, on Houston's outer edges hotel construction has boomed in the 1990s, with more than 100 extended-stay and limited-service facilities opening their doors along the city's interstates.



© 1999 Heiter + Hordoway



© 1999 Heiter + Hordoway



© 1999 Heiter + Hordoway



© 1999 Heiter + Hordoway

30 percent increase in hotel space.

It's a crowded field: hoteliers competing for the limited-stay and extended-stay customers include Southwood, La Quinta, Days Inn, Wingate, Candlewood, Marriott (with brands including Marriott Courtyard, TownePlace Suites, Residence Inn, and Springhill Suites), Drury Inn, and the French company Accor (with its six brands: Minitel, Sofitel, Novotel, Mercure, Ibis, and — surprisingly, since its ads used to mock other hotels for offering such unnecessarily expensive luxuries as French milled soap — Motel 6.)

And that crowded field can create a crowded roadside. At the intersection of I-10 and Beltway 8, five limited-stay and extended-stay properties have been built in the last two years. On a stretch of the Sam Houston Tollway, eight limited-service and extended-stay hotels can be found within a mile of each other. Nationwide, these new hotels have tended to spring up where population and employment are growing fastest, and where there has been the longest drought in hotel construction. Ergo, the growing suburban edges of Houston and other Sunbelt cities have been where they've clustered.

They cluster in other ways, as well:

Marriott has started building as many as four of its properties on a single block — TownePlace Suites for extended stays, Courtyard for one-to-two-night stays, Residence Inn for longer stays at a lower price than TownePlace, and Springhill Suites, priced between TownePlace and Courtyard. Each of these hotels caters to a different type of traveler and a different price point.

As the Marriott example shows, the limited-stay and extended-stay hotel types were born out of a move to greater and greater segmentation in the hospitality market. No longer can a single type of hotel serve vacationers, conventioners, and all levels of business travelers. Divisions, by price and location, within each of those groups are also important. Some convention-goers want a location in the city center, while others look for nearby theme parks or industries that the hotels have clustered around. Some vacationing families want an upscale hotel, while others are squeezing budgets. Some business travelers want first-class accommodations, while the more numerous “road-warrior” salesmen, service personnel, and consultants, constantly on the road to see clients and prospects, are routed to cost-saving limited-stay and

extended-stay hotel properties. The hotel industry has been sorting itself out to provide for them all, with the limited-stay and extended-stay hotels emerging as the most flexible and efficient types.

Aside from the market pressure, several other factors have led to what industry analysts routinely refer to as a frenzy of limited-stay and extended-stay hotel building since 1994. First is their low cost of construction. Says Clinton Rappole, “the rule of thumb for hotel pricing is one dollar in room rent for each \$1,000 in construction cost per room.” Houston architect C.C. Lee of STOA International, whose clients have included Wingate, Hampton Inn and Suites, Comfort Inn, and Days Inn, points out that while construction costs for a typical full-service hotel will run more than \$100,000 per guest room, construction costs for typical limited-service hotels range from \$40,000 to \$50,000, while extended-stay hotels come in at around \$75,000 per room. Such savings stem partly from low land prices, says Lee, but they are also related to the project type's typically lightweight construction.

Some limited-service and extended-stay hotels are built to be operated by a parent company, and those tend to be

solidly constructed. Wyndham Hotel's extended-stay hotel properties, for example, have poured-in-place concrete frames. Newer La Quinta hotels have masonry walls.

But those are exceptions. Most limited-stay and extended-stay hotels are built by investors or speculators who are seeking a rapid resale. At these hotels the emphasis, with dreary predictability, is on holding down first-dollar costs by using the lightest construction methods and flimsiest finishes and fixtures allowed by the building codes. Most limited-service and extended-stay hotels are wood-framed in a style indistinguishable from apartment or tract house construction, even though they may hold more than 250 rooms and stand up to four stories tall. They are usually skinned with insulating panels and sprayed-on stucco or clapboard siding. Residential imagery and reminders of residential scale, intended to convey familiarity, friendliness, and accessibility, are important parts of the appeal of these hotels, and they make possible the use of low-cost construction and materials from typical suburban housing.

Though one might think that a little architectural distinctiveness would go a long way toward establishing an identity

