

HYB26

Annual Edition

Converging Forces – The Future is
Hybrid by Design



The Hotel Yearbook

Foresight and innovation in the global hotel industry



HYB



Can we please not say Hybrid, please

Beyond Hybrid

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Hybrid is hospitality's buzzword du jour—but what if it's a dead end? Matthias Huettenbraeuer, Hospitality Strategist & Senior Executive Advisor, argues that "hybrid" represents terminal thinking, not transformation. Instead of reassembling old boxes, he proposes three conditions for discovery: convergence, fluidity, and versatility. The key metric? Engagement—and redefining hospitality around how much of someone's life we hold space for.

Hybrid is the future. Everybody agrees, hence, it must be true. Or is it?

There are a few things about the future, like, for example, that we are not particularly good at predicting it. Also, there are different kinds of futures: for example, there are "could-futures" and there are "should-futures" (read Nick Foster's new book to learn all about it).

Could-futures are about being excited about and open to possibility, about results that you haven't expected; they follow the mantra of "just because you know where it started, doesn't mean you know where it ends."

And then there are should-futures: dogmatic often, data-driven, incremental mostly, it is Lego innovation; basically, take two things and stack them. Done. Often, those two boxes have gone through an elaborate process of optimizing, hyper-specializing, best-practicing, until they weren't flexible, weren't resilient, weren't interesting anymore. So, in some Frankenstein move, we glue boxes together, attach a new term and believe we have a new concept.

Welcome to hybrid.

Let's take a quick look at the best innovator, at the master of adaptability, continuous evolution, diversification: let's look at nature. Nature does hybrid too, some hybrids are pretty awesome: take the mule, a hybrid between horse and donkey - it has some cool features, like it can trot down the Grand Canyon like no other mammal can. But, like most hybrids, it is unable to reproduce; in business terms, the line is discontinued, hybrids mostly are terminals, not transitions.

Hybrids are mostly terminals, not transitions.

Sometimes, of course, hybrids play an important role in moving from one era to the next: think Toyota Prius and its major contribution to move us towards EVs before EVs were fully ready. Big achievement, hats off to the Prius, but carrying two propulsion systems meant it was always compromised. In the bigger scheme of things it is not the future, it is an interregnum.

Let's not build our future on interregna.

Instead, I want to encourage you to follow the path of a could-future. Instead of playing Lego, writing numbers fiction, pretending we know where it ends, we should focus on the three conditions that hold open design space, the framework for discovery, in which we will find our answers:

Convergence. Fluidity. Versatility.

Looking at convergence, Netflix is a great case. 25 years ago I was involved in a convergence project, merging TV and the internet, we knew where it started - two separate boxes - so we thought we knew how it would end - one box, the only question being which box. Again, we are not very good at predicting futures, because in an unexpected move, streaming turned out to be not two concepts coexisting, it dissolved the concepts altogether. Content became entirely device independent (networks, not spaces, to draw a real estate analogy). It disrupted the entire production and distribution landscape. It revolutionized viewing habits. And it created content forms that didn't exist before. Reimagination, not reassembling.

Fluidity is about how it moves. It is not about designing structures or image backgrounds, it is about designing flows, the experience of shifting functions, modes, moods, ceding a level of control to the user, but leading by precise but subtle direction, interventions. It is a bit like Jazz, not scripted like a symphony, yet every bit as intentional. Sounds abstract? Go visit Hans Meyer's Zoku and you see how it works - that it works. Spaces that flow seamlessly from touch down, to short stay, to long stay, from intimate to social hub, from productive to procrastinating, observing guests rather than predicting.

Versatility is probably what most people look for when they say hybrid, the Swiss Army knife dream, the super app fantasy, it's the gravitational pull we feel away from hyper-specialization's dead-end, and the instinct is right. Versatility isn't compromise or hedging bets, it is the designed-in capacity of excelling at multiple purposes. Growth, resilience, engagement all flow from versatility.

Yet, again, there is a fundamental difference between versatility and bolting together specialized parts - its openness to emergent function. You design for multiplicity and the world shows you possibilities you never imagined. Starbucks didn't set out to become the world's largest coworking space. Nobody predicted the role of SMS in making mobile phones great and changing the way our species interacts. Versatility creates the conditions for surprising success.

Convergence. Fluidity. Versatility.

If that is our road to success, how do we measure success?

In hospitality we have always looked at footprint and frequency. How many locations, units, outlets, how many visits, how many transactions, revenue per a fraction of our square meters, revenue by every square meter. That's terminal thinking, recording discrete countable events.

Designing for convergence, fluidity and versatility takes hospitality right into our current economic system: aiming at engagement and duration - how much of someone's day / week / life do we hold space for? Not "did they check in" but "are they in a relationship with this space, with our ecosystem across multiple contexts?"

How much of someone's life do we hold space for?

Engagement then, of course, is not just a metric, it's a fundamental reimagining of what hospitality is. Coming back to the Netflix analogy, Netflix doesn't want us to watch more movies. They want to be your default leisure state. Hospitality, designed for convergence, fluidity and versatility, wants to be your default provider of space, service and community.

So, if I may insist, can we please not say hybrid, please?

But when it comes to creating spaces that converge meaningfully, move fluidly, serve multiple purposes brilliantly, and create genuine engagement – let us do a lot more of that.

