TALLER BIGGER BETTER

THE LEMON TREE PREMIER AT CITY CENTRE GURGAON HAS BEEN REBUILT TO ANNOUNCE THE ARRIVAL OF A MORE LUXURIOUS EXPERIENCE

BY: BIKNAMJIT RAY

THE PROCESS of tearing down an existing hotel and rebuilding one in its place is no easy task. And if the hotel in question is one of your company’s earliest, the decision can come up against a very unique set of issues.

So, when The Lemon Tree Hotel Company, one of the country’s fastest growing chains decided to shut down one of their extremely successful hotels in Gurgaon and build a brand new one in its place, it must have raised a few eyebrows in the company.

The new property, is larger, taller and swankier than its earlier avatar. It’s a hotel which has been built by an organisation who are more confident about its product and about how the market will receive it.

The Lemon Tree Premier at City Centre, Gurgaon is a taste of things to come with Lemon Tree Hotels. Perfectly snug in its plot with 61 rooms, two food and beverage outlets in an expansive modern looking lobby area which takes up most of the ground floor, and is designed by Bobby Mukherjee, another first for the chain, this is a hotel which has upgraded and then some. It is, a very intelligent way to see how a product work before expanding it further.

First let’s begin with the bricks and mortar that goes into the story, or rather hotel. For that, we turn to J K Chawla, Executive VP, Projects & Engineering Services, The Lemon Tree Hotel Company, a man, who has built every single hotel owned by the organisation and the third employee to join it.

“This hotel is actually a rebuild. This was originally the second hotel of the company built on a plot of 825 square metres. We purchased it in 2003 and built a small boutique hotel of 45 rooms—built according to a control
News monitored for: Lemon Tree Hotels
**THIS PROPERTY IS AN INDICATION OF WHAT LIES IN STORE FOR THE GROUP’S FUTURE PROJECTS**

design, like in Chandigarh. We had to keep the height to 15 metres and use a certain kind of stone on the facade of the hotel, "I remember", he said. Chawla remembers how half way through the project, while the building was still being constructed, the company got a notification that changes could be made to the design, but by then it was already too late to change as they were halfway through already.

Not that it mattered once the hotel opened. "When the hotel was finally commissioned in May 2005, after a build which took 13 months, it was an immediate hit. This really strengthened the financial backbone of the hotel," Chawla explained. When the hotel was built at its current locations, there were no other properties in the area, the likes of the Westin, Leela and Crowne Plaza, all came later. In fact, the surrounding area was absolutely empty.

The secret to a fast build, according to him was the
fact they had a focussed team of seventy people who are involved in construction. “Decisions are made quickly. I personally take a lot of decisions on behalf of the company,” he said. In Chawla’s view it’s easier to build a new hotel from scratch than renovating a property. “When you renovate, you usually get a lot of surprises. Your budgets go haywire. It’s very difficult to do your estimates and with the investors’ pressure, it’s more difficult and more challenging,” he said.

Unlike when the hotel was being built first, the time it took to dismantle it was much more. The area was built up, in fact the hotel is in a row along with other hotel properties. “We somehow took down the old structure and extended the basement another 4 metres downwards and then began to build. There were issues now with noise, transporting concrete to the site and of course storing raw materials,” he remembers.
The size and nature of the new building was also different, thought the plot size has remained the same. “Our FSI is more now. We have five floors and one basement, at a height of 20 metres, compared to three floors before,” he said. The building took 20 months to complete, which is a little longer than what was usual for the team, but the results, according to Chawla was well worth the wait.

One of the reasons for the built taking longer was the fact that the new property has experimented with a new design. “While Bobby Mukherjee did the lobby of the hotel, we designed and implemented the rest of the hotel. Our cost was a little higher than before, because of the new materials used and the show kitchens which were built,” he added.

On the subject of design, we turned to Ritu Ranjan, Chief Design Officer, The Lemon Tree Hotel Company, who began by stating that the chain had a certain brand standard running through all their properties, something conceptualised by Patu Keswani. “He wanted a no-nonsense, fresh, spirited, looking property, which is a theme which runs through our properties. We do have certain elements recurring everywhere, including this hotel, like the stained glass elements in the main lobby,” she said.

“In this hotel, we went a different route, this was our first experiment with designer Bobby Mukherjee who was given a brief to do an urbane design, something reminiscent of a New York City hotel,” Ranjan said, adding that it was one of the places where buildings deal with space constraints, but have a very boutique feel to them.
“We wanted to show people that we can up our game and take the product to new heights. Mukherjee gave us designs and we changed what we felt was needed to make the space more practical for our customers and for those who have to work here,” she added.

The lobby is warm and welcoming with three spaces which are distinct, but separate from each other. The coffee shop, Citrus Café open 24 hours is tucked in one corner, while the Republic of Noodles Restaurant is more opulent and shines from the middle of the lobby, right next to the show wall behind the common bar.

Another person who was involved the design implementation of the hotel as well as its upkeep since opening is Sareena Kocchar, VP- Housekeeping. The Lemon Tree Hotel Company. From the period of design to execution and operation and handling the final product, Kocchar keeps a keen eye on things. The first thing she says about the new hotel is “It is different from other Lemon Trees because you could see a lot of wood finish. I remember having an initial meeting with Bobby Mukherjee and asking how were we going to maintain the product?” She said with a smile.

“The new products which are now in the market since the hotel was built first, has made maintenance much easier and these have been incorporated into the new design. Take the example of the wall tiles in the lobby, earlier it used to be clad in marble, now we have installed pre-polished tiled that need only be wiped down to retain their shine. Even the polish of the wood finished in the lobby and other areas are...
News monitored for: Lemon Tree Hotels
maintained using things like R4*, Kocchar said.

“We have straight line furniture in the rooms, which is much easier to clean. It saves time as well. As for materials, we have been able to save 40 percent of costs by using high grade modern laminates in the place of much more expensive veneers, without compromising on look and quality,” she added.

The total cost of the project comes to around Rs 55 lakh per room, which, is a brand standard for Lemon Tree, according to sources. So, when we spoke with Sumant Jaidka, Chief Operating Officer- North, The Lemon Tree Hotel Company, he said the strategy as far as the hotel was concerned, was very clear.

“Gurgaon is one of the fastest growing markets in India. When we thought of rebuilding this hotel, our fundamentals and thinking was very clear. We wanted to upgrade it. We wanted customers to have a more premium experience. We want the market to have a clear understanding that Lemon Tree is moving up. We have hired some great staff. We have started some new add-ons in this property never seen in any of our properties before, like airport assistance and express check in at this hotel,” he began. Room rates would not go below Rs 6,000 he was insistent.

“With a cluster of properties in the area, the strategy is to oversell, so if you make a booking today, even if I am sold out, I will overbook, and shift guests to the new hotel to give them the new premium experience,” he explained. And customers, says Jaidka love the new hotel. While the corporate customer is still critical to his business, there is a growing demand in the niche stay-cation market.

The hotel has been able to put its hotel network to good use when the hotel was shut for its rebuild. “The high end business of the hotel was shifted to our Leisure Valley property. They got to experience that product as well,” he says. They have all come back home, to something special.

**AUTHOR BIO**: Bikramjit Ray is Executive Editor of BW Hotelier.
News monitored for: Lemon Tree Hotels
News monitored for: Lemon Tree Hotels