

DESIGNED, NOT DECLARED

Rethinking Responsibility in
Guest Experiences

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Executive Summary

Responsibility in hospitality is at a turning point. Expectations are rising, but the way responsibility is delivered through the guest experience is not keeping pace.

This report looks at a gap the industry has not fully addressed: where responsibility shows up in the guest experience, where it adds friction instead of value, and three recurring tensions that keep getting in the way: the compliance trap, the communication paradox, and the authenticity-scale paradox.

When leading independent hotel practitioners were asked to rethink responsible hospitality, they consistently moved past the places the industry has historically focused on. Nearly a third of their ideas concentrated on the moments before a guest arrives, where expectations, defaults, and the tone of the stay are set.

The in-room experience, where most traditional sustainability efforts live, drew just 14% of ideas. The strongest thinking sat outside the room, in staff interactions and neighborhood connections. Departure drew only 4%, suggesting the industry has barely started to design it.

This runs counter to where the industry spends most of its resources. Most current approaches rely on programs, messaging, and guest behavior, and these are exactly the things that break down in practice.

This report draws on a Human-Centered Design LabTM held during the Independent Lodging Congress (ILC) Confab in San Juan in February 2026, bringing together independent hotel owners, operators, designers, and real guests. It maps where responsibility currently shows up in the guest journey, surfaces the tensions that keep getting in the way, and offers a set of practical actions teams can put into practice immediately.

Responsible hospitality does not have to create friction or extra effort for guests. It can add value to the experience itself. Independent hotels have been doing this for a long time: through the decisions they make, the people they hire, and the places they're part of. The opportunity now is to do it more deliberately: with the guest and the community at the center of every stage of the experience.

WHERE PRACTITIONERS SAW THE BIGGEST DESIGN OPPORTUNITY

Pre-arrival	29%
Neighborhood	21%
Staff	18%
In-room	14%
Departure	4%

With the guest and community at the center, responsibility becomes hospitality.



Sustainability was Built for Scale, not for Experience

The sustainability narrative in hospitality has been shaped by large corporate actors, for large corporate systems. It prioritizes standardized environmental metrics, centralized reporting, and scale.

At the property level, this rarely reflects how hotels actually operate. Responsibility becomes something to report, rather than something designed into the experience.

Responsibility becomes something to report, not something built into the guest experience.

Take one of the industry's most visible sustainability efforts: the towel reuse card. Research shows it works mainly through guilt and social pressure, not real guest motivation. It asks guests to opt in, change their behavior, and carry responsibility, when they are away from home, the exact moment the experience should feel easiest.

More recent research finds that guest-facing sustainability messaging often produces little operational impact while adding friction to the stay. In some cases, it actively erodes value: guests perceive less quality, not more.

The pattern is clear: when responsibility depends on guest behavior, it doesn't work.

This isn't just a large-brand problem, it's industry-wide. But independent hotels operate differently, and that difference is a useful place to look for what does work.

THE RESEARCH

- Current programs rely on social norms or guilt, not intrinsic motivation
- Behavior-dependent approaches produce inconsistent results
- Staff often experience these programs as cost pressure, not purpose
- Guests approve of sustainability in principle, but do not value it in practice

Guest participation drops when sustainability requires effort.

Where Responsibility Already Lives

Independent hotels are structurally different. They're embedded in their communities, smaller in scale, and run on relationships rather than systems.

What corporate models try to standardize, independents already navigate every day: through the people they know, the constraints they work within, and the choices they make property by property. Responsibility is already present in how independents operate. The opportunity is to recognize it, design around it, and make it visible.

What the workshop revealed was a different way of approaching responsibility: one the broader industry can learn from, regardless of model.

73%

of travelers aim to support local small businesses when visiting a destination. (Amex, 2025)

WHAT MAKES INDEPENDENTS STRUCTURALLY DIFFERENT?

EMBEDDED IN PLACE

Independent hotels are structurally connected to their communities through local sourcing, neighborhood hiring, and ongoing relationships that extend beyond the property.

OPERATIONALLY GROUNDED

Without centralized systems, decisions get made on the ground, balancing cost, guest experience, and impact in real time, not through standardized frameworks.

CHOSEN FOR CONNECTION

Guests who choose independent hotels are not looking for standardization. They are looking for connection to place, people, and culture. That is also how they read responsibility.



The HCD Lab: How the Insights were GeneratedTM

The insights in this report were built with people who live and breathe independent hotels. A first-of-its-kind Human-Centered Design LabTM was co-developed by CRH and Lateral Strategy, and hosted by ILC as part of its San Juan Confab in February 2026. It brought together independent owners, operators, designers, and brand leaders from a range of property types, sizes, and geographies.

The workshop was designed to surface how responsibility shows up and breaks down in day-to-day hospitality decisions.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS DID

Participants worked through a human-centered design process to open up space for innovation in an area typically approached through compliance and regulation, rather than design. Across the session, they:

- Reframed problems before jumping to solutions, using human-centered design tools
- Generated ideas through specific guest personas grounded in industry research
- Worked with real guests in the room, testing assumptions in real time
- Worked in cross-functional groups to break down industry silos
- Focused on specific moments in the guest journey, examining how responsibility actually shows up
- Pushed ideas to failure, identifying where friction, scale, or guest behavior would break them
- Prioritized solutions and identified where each one would create friction or fall apart in practice

40

INDEPENDENT
HOTEL LEADERS

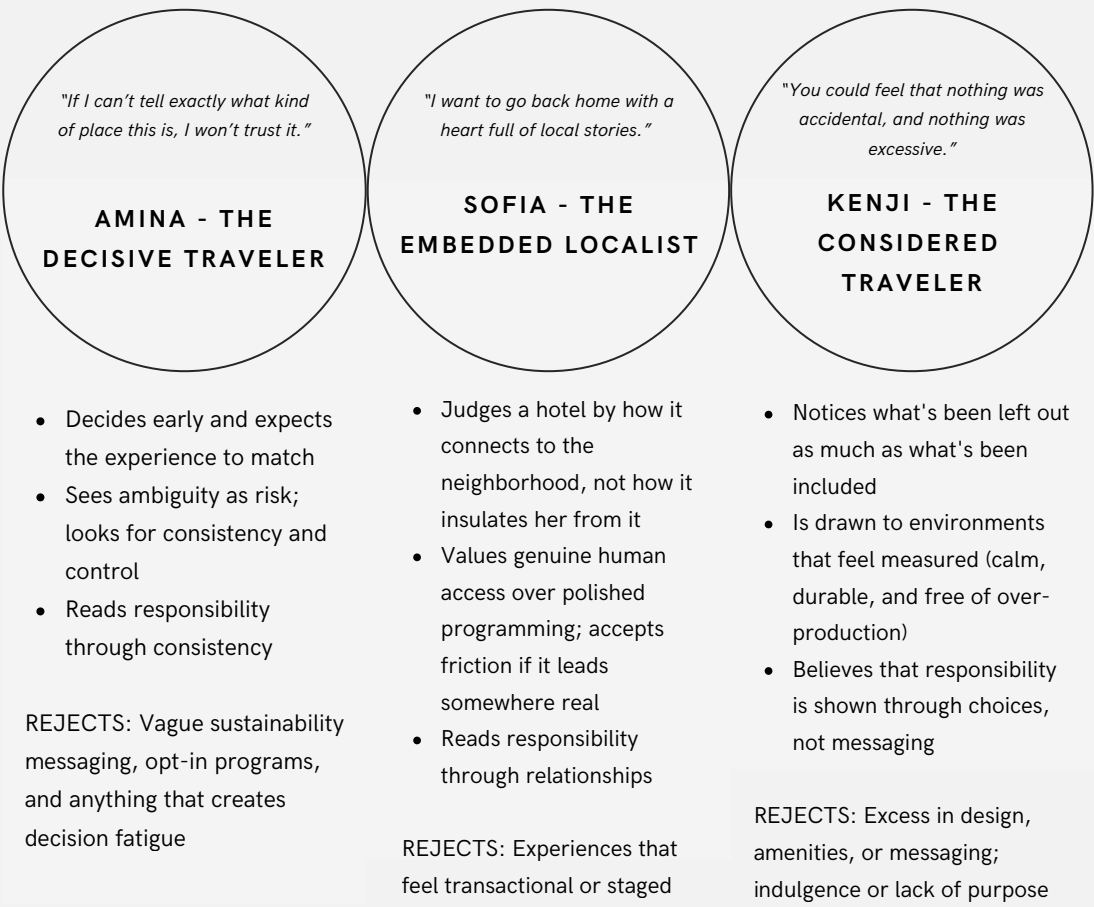
28

SOLUTIONS

Designing for Real Guests

Alongside the HCD methodology, we developed three personas drawn from workshop observations, traveler trend research, hospitality literature, and broader cultural signals on values-based travelers: each one reflecting how a different kind of guest chooses an independent hotel. Each persona was represented by a real guest, in the room, throughout the session, challenging assumptions and shaping how participants defined problems and generated ideas across the guest journey.

THE 3 PERSONAS



All three personas shaped the workshop. In the journey comparison later in this report, we use Sofia as our lens: Amina and Kenji will be explored in future work.

A Different Way to Design the Experience

Human-centered design starts with people, not solutions. Instead of asking what to build, it asks what guests are actually experiencing, and how that experience can be improved

This matters for sustainability.

Most approaches rely on adding programs, messaging, or guest actions, but overlook how responsibility is actually experienced. Starting from the guest perspective makes it possible to design responsibility into the experience itself, rather than layering it on.

The most important step is not designing better solutions, it is defining the right problem.

Teams rarely start from the same definition of the problem. Operations sees one thing, service another, branding something else. Solutions get built before the problem is fully defined or even agreed on.

In this session, participants stepped back before solving anything and aligned on what the problem actually was, from the guest's point of view, so the whole room was working from the same starting point.

Before generating solutions, three patterns kept surfacing. Together, they describe the problem the workshop set out to address.

WHAT THIS APPROACH CHANGES

From adding programs → to designing experiences

From guest behavior → to operational design

From messaging → to felt experience

The challenge is not to do more but to design differently.

The Problem: Three Tensions that Keep Getting in the Way

Responsible hospitality consistently runs into three tensions, which can help explain why so many efforts fall flat in practice, even when intentions are right. They show up across the industry, not just in independent hotels.

1

THE COMPLIANCE TRAP

When responsibility relies on guest behavior, it breaks

Solutions that depend on guests opting in, following instructions, or changing behavior consistently underperform. They push responsibility onto someone who is away from home, at the exact moment they're least willing to carry it.

2

THE COMMUNICATION PARADOX

The more you tell guests about responsibility, the less they trust it

The value of sustainability data isn't just in displaying it to guests, it's in being able to back every claim with it. Guests trust what they can experience, and what can be evidenced when they ask or seek information. Messaging that outruns the evidence does more harm than silence.

3

THE AUTHENTICITY - SCALE PARADOX

What makes experiences meaningful also makes them fragile

Community-based experiences lose value when scaled. Too much access disrupts them; too little makes them feel staged. The answer is not expansion, but careful limitation and curation.

Given these tensions, the workshop aligned on one design question, and used it to guide everything that followed:

How might independent hotels design responsible guest experiences that add value, without guilt, friction, or instruction?

Where the Guest Journey Begins to Take Shape

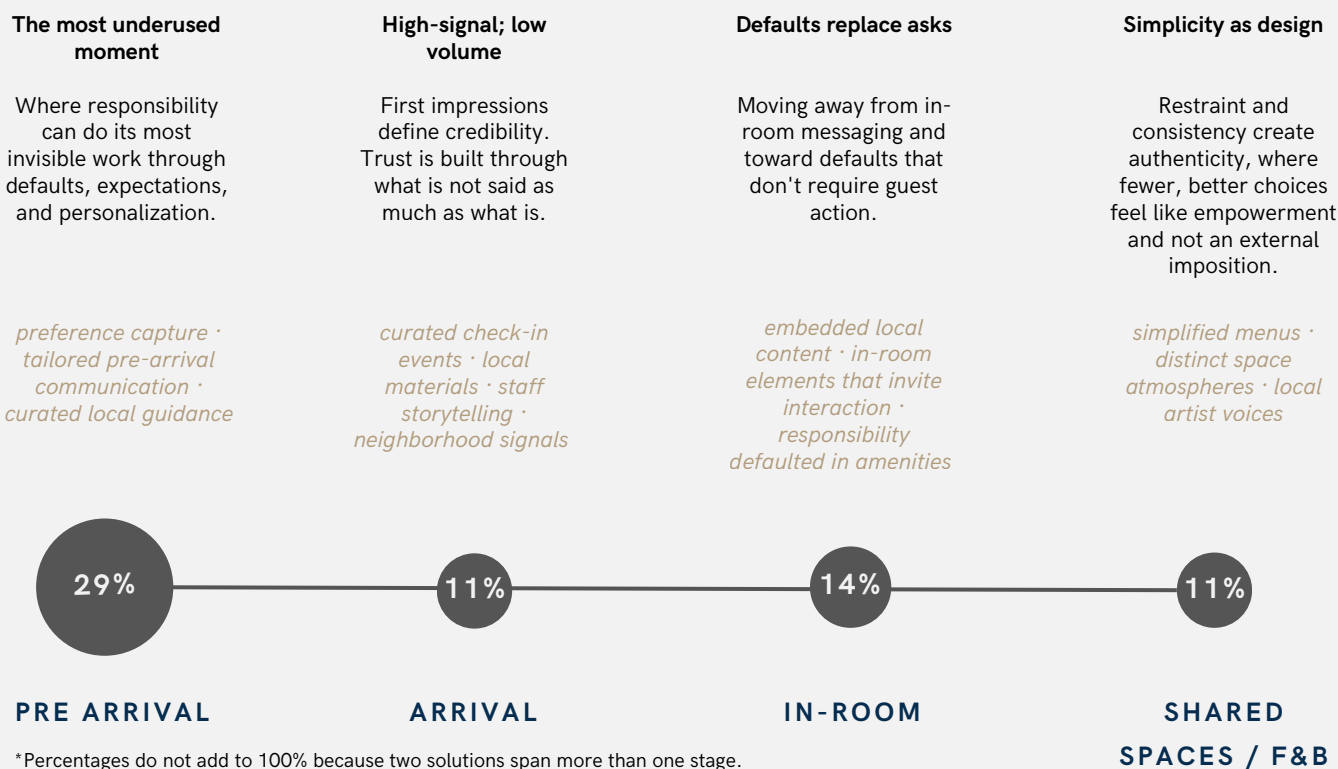
Working from that design question, the workshop followed the full arc of a guest's stay: from the moment they consider booking to the moment they leave and beyond.

Responsibility was designed around real moments, real decisions, and real behavior, not checklist requirements.

Viewed this way, the journey reveals something useful: where industry attention is already concentrated, and where it is missing entirely.

The distribution in the next two pages shows where workshop participants focused their thinking, highlighting where responsibility could be most effectively designed, and where opportunity remains.

WHERE SOLUTIONS WERE PRIORITIZED ACROSS THE GUEST JOURNEY



What the Journey Reveals

Mapping ideas across the guest journey revealed that responsibility is not evenly distributed. Some moments are highly designed and intentional, while others remain underdeveloped or overlooked.

The strongest thinking sat outside the room: before arrival, and through staff and across neighborhood experiences. These are the moments where independent hotels already operate differently, and where responsibility shows up most naturally.

The in-room experience drew far less attention, signaling a move away from guest-facing sustainability asks. Rather than relying on messaging or behavior change, participants shifted toward operational defaults and embedded design.

Departure is almost entirely absent. Despite its potential to extend the relationship beyond the stay, it remains almost entirely undesigned. This shows a clear opportunity of where the next stage of innovation could emerge.

WHERE SOLUTIONS WERE PRIORITIZED ACROSS THE GUEST JOURNEY



*Percentages do not add to 100% because two solutions span more than one stage.



The Guest Journey in Practice

Here is what the same guest journey looks like through two lenses: a traditional approach, and one where responsibility has been designed in from the start. For this comparison, we use Sofia, the Embedded Localist. Sofia travels to feel part of a place. She doesn't look for sustainability messaging, she reads responsibility through relationships, choices, and whether the hotel gives more than it takes.

FROM TRADITIONAL

TO RESPONSIBLY DESIGNED

BOOKING & PRE ARRIVAL

- Generic "sustainability certified" filters or badges that provide no clear view into the property's actual practices or priorities, or engagement with place.
- Carbon offset add-ons shift financial and moral responsibility to the guest.
- Confirmation emails combine long sustainability pledges, generic itineraries, and extractive upsells.
- The booking page leads with a clear story of place: ownership, history, and local relationships.
- Responsibility is described through specific operational signals, with no action required from Sofia.
- Pre-arrival messages introduce the neighborhood through a real person, with specific recommendations and optional invitations shaped by community partnerships

ARRIVAL

- Arrival spaces follow brand standards, with little connection to place.
- Check-in focuses on room features and services, with no orientation to the neighborhood.
- Opt-out housekeeping creates awkward compliance moments.
- Certifications and sustainability claims are displayed but lack meaning for most guests.
- Arrival signals connection to place through materials, objects, and layout.
- Check-in becomes a conversation about the neighborhood, led by staff who know it.
- Recommendations are specific, personal, and tied to real people.
- Responsibility is evident to Sofia through the space, staffing, and partnerships, not messaging.

IN-ROOM

- Towel reuse cards and linen prompts require guest participation.
- Energy monitors and timers introduce guilt-based behavior.
- Rooms are described as "local" but lack traceable origin or material specificity.
- Isolated sustainability gestures, a refillable dispenser, a local snack, sit alongside unchanged, higher-impact practices.
- Responsible defaults are simply how the room works, with no need for Sofia's participation.
- Housekeeping, amenities, and materials reflect operational decisions, not messaging.
- A small, specific curation of local objects rewards Sofia's curiosity without explanation.
- Furniture and amenities are locally sourced and traceable. Sofia doesn't have to read the label to trust them.

SHARED SPACES / F&B

- Sustainability signage is visible, while high-impact operations remain unaddressed.
- Menus with sustainability icons frame responsible choices as opt-in decisions.
- Symbolic actions, such as plastic straws removal without a comprehensive waste management plan, replace systemic change.
- Materials reflect durability, local sourcing, and measured tradeoffs. The reasoning is available if Sofia asks.
- Menus do not label “sustainable” choices, because everything meets that standard. The staff can tell Sofia where the eggs come from, but only if she asks.
- Sourcing relationships are visible through simple, specific signals.
- Local artists and makers are present as ongoing relationships, not design references. Sofia can ask about the potter whose work she’s eating from, the weaver whose piece is on the wall, and get a real answer

STAFF & COMMUNICATION

- Staff promote sustainability credentials, turning interactions into messaging.
- Loyalty programs reward “green” behavior that asks guests to forgo services, while the hotel retains the operational savings.
- Limited sustainability credentials leaves guests unable to assess whether the practices reflect their values.
- Staff act as connectors and storytellers, sharing personal recommendations and real supplier relationships.
- There is no loyalty program; the relationship is built through experience, not points. If Sofia comes back, it’s because the place earned it.
- The hotel’s story is visible and carried by staff. Performance is accessible through clear, specific information if Sofia wants to explore further.

NEIGHBORHOOD & PLACE

- Pre-packaged local experiences function as lists, not relationships.
- Programming is designed for guest consumption, not rooted in community life.
- Staff volunteering substitutes community strategy, outsourcing civic responsibility to employees
- One-off donations replace ongoing local partnerships, giving that asks nothing of the hotel and changes nothing about how it operates.
- There is no curated map; the front desk maintains a living, evolving list shaped by staff. Someone mentions their favorite Tuesday market. Sofia goes.
- Community involvement is operational: local sourcing, hiring, and open shared spaces.
- Hotel events are genuinely open; locals participate by choice.
- Staff are not deployed for community optics. They are neighbors first and a core connection to place.
- Community investment is ongoing. Partnerships are built on mutual relationships.

DEPARTURE & AFTER

- Disconnected sustainability fees, offset prompts, and operational tasks add friction at departure.
- Post-stay communication focuses on transactions or additional actions.
- Checkout is simple and personal, with no added tasks or prompts. The staff member remembers Sofia’s name and asks if she found the market. She did.
- Follow-up extends the relationship through stories and continued connection to place. Sofia recognizes a local artisan she met in a hotel post written 6 weeks later and shares it. The relationship continues through a shared sense of place.

Sofia’s journey is one application of the framework. Different properties will run this lens through different guests: a city hotel and a coastal lodge will surface different moments, different friction points, different opportunities, but the underlying design questions stay the same.

From Tensions to Design Principles

What does responsibility designed-in actually look like? Across the tensions and the journey data, five principles emerge. These patterns hold whether the property is a 20-room inn, a coastal lodge or a 500-room group urban hotel.



The shift: from responsibility as something declared, to something designed and experienced.

Designing Responsibility into Practice

Truly responsible hospitality is rarely created through one big initiative. To embed it, it must be prioritized through small decisions repeated consistently across the guest journey. The actions below are organized around the five design principles: each one a concrete way to put a principle into practice, at three timescales. The point isn't to do everything. It's to start small, build the practice, and let the principles guide the the guest experience over time.

Principle 1: Defaults Over Asks

Build the responsible outcome into the experience. Don't ask the guest unless asking adds value.

THIS WEEK	Find the asks. Walk through the property's SOPs, check-in scripts, in-room collateral, and digital touchpoints, and list every moment a guest is being asked to choose responsibility (opt-out housekeeping cards, towel reuse prompts, linen change requests, sustainability check-boxes at booking, etc.)
THIS SEASON	For each ask on the list, identify what system it sits inside (SOP, PMS setting, check-in workflow, signage standard) and what it would take to flip the default. Pick one to actually change. Start with the easiest, not the most visible.
OVER TIME	Make "what's the default?" a standing question whenever a new program, amenity, or service is introduced. The default is the design.

Principle 2: Stories over Checklists

Guests trust what they can see, feel, and understand, not abstract claims or labels.

Pick one object in a guest-facing space: a piece of art, a piece of furniture, an amenity, a food item. Write down its story: who made it, where it comes from, why it's there. Share it with one staff member.	THIS WEEK
Replace one piece of sustainability signage (an in-room card, a lobby plaque, a website badge) with one specific story about the property's relationship to its place.	THIS SEASON
For every responsibility claim the property makes, develop the discipline of asking what specific story or evidence backs this up? If there isn't one, either stop making the claim or build the relationship that justifies it.	OVER TIME

Principle 3: Curation Over Access

Protect what makes the experience valuable. Limit access through trusted relationships, not scale.

THIS WEEK	Look at what is offered to guests as "local" (recommendations, partnerships, experiences, etc.) For each, identify what's backed by a real relationship and what's there for the sake of breadth. Cut, narrow, or replace the second.
THIS SEASON	For one community partnership or local supplier relationship, evaluate whether you're scaling it beyond what it can hold. If yes, narrow the audience or frequency. Pick one partnership to actually deepen, not just maintain.
OVER TIME	Develop a small, curated set of local connections the property can confidently stand behind. Treat the list's size as a feature, not a limit.

Principle 4: Restraint Over Declaration

Let the experience speak. Step back from messaging and let choices, materials, and people carry meaning.

Find the declarations. Start where the property tells guests what it stands for: the website, printed collateral, in-room cards, lobby signage, certifications on display, welcome materials, staff scripts. List every place the property is making a claim, asserting a value, or displaying a credential.	THIS WEEK
For each declaration, ask whether it can be backed by a specific operational decision, story, or piece of evidence that can be produced on request.	THIS SEASON
Establish the rule that no responsibility claim, value statement, or credential will be guest-facing unless it can be specifically evidenced when asked. Build the discipline to let the experience speak for itself.	OVER TIME

Principle 5: Evidence over Optics

Track what you already do, before tracking more. Build the measurement layer that lets every responsibility claim be backed by something real.

THIS WEEK	Start counting one thing the property already does but hasn't quantified (e.g. local sourcing by category, community events held per year, staff who live within a defined radius, hours of community engagement). Pick the one that's easiest to count first.
THIS SEASON	For the metric you started tracking, establish how it gets recorded going forward: who owns it, where it lives, how often it updates. Then start a second metric, using what you learned about the first.
OVER TIME	Align business and responsibility metrics into a single system, focused on a small number of meaningful signals that is consistently tracked, easy to understand, and defensible when asked.

What Comes Next

Responsible hospitality does not have to create friction. It can add value to the guest experience. Independent hotels have demonstrated this for a long time, operating through relationships, place, and people in ways that larger systems are only beginning to replicate. The opportunity now is to embed that practice more deliberately, not through more language, more programs, or more requirements placed on guests, but through the operational decisions, defaults, and community ties that already define independent hospitality at its best.

This report surfaces where the industry's collective attention is, and isn't, directed. The shift away from in-room asks toward earlier and more relational moments is just beginning. The departure phase is one of the most underused moments and one of the most promising as the place where the guest's relationship to the property and its community can extend beyond the visit. Beyond the customer journey, the everyday decisions that define independent hospitality like sourcing, hiring, who you partner with, what you choose not to do, deserve the same careful design thinking applied here.

This report is part of a broader body of work that CRH is developing to show practitioners that responsibility is not a compliance exercise, but a design opportunity. The next pieces will go deeper into the moments this report has only begun to map. The ultimate goal is to give practitioners the tools and knowledge they need to keep building responsibility from the ground up. That means centering on guests and communities rather than on the external frameworks and requirements that have defined the conversation for too long. Only then does "responsible hospitality" stop being a modifier and simply becomes hospitality.

Responsibility
is not a
compliance
exercise.
It is a design
opportunity.
The work now
is to take it up.

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About this Report

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The Center for Responsible Hospitality is a nonprofit working to make responsible hospitality more visible, measurable, and actionable through research, data, and practitioner-led learning. Contact: info@responsiblehospitality.org



Lateral Strategy is a strategy and innovation firm specializing in human-centered design, helping organizations design solutions rooted in real human behavior, systems, and lived experience. Contact: ale@golateral.com



The Independent Lodging Congress (ILC) is a platform for independent hospitality professionals, convening owners, operators, designers, and industry leaders to exchange ideas, surface emerging perspectives, and advance the field through practitioner-led dialogue.