



OPINION

SPACE RACE

Is the flexi-loft the smart option for mobile professionals asks Lauren Ho

A new hotel concept matches boutique buzz with Airbnb-style domestic space. Billed as a temporary office, hang-out space, place to rest your head and instant local social network, Amsterdam-based Zoku promises to revolutionise business travel. Is this the sweet spot for the modern mobile professional asks Lauren Ho.

There has been a revolution in the way people travel. Hopping on a transatlantic flight to New York for a spot of retail therapy or booking a last minute weekend getaway in Paris has become almost common practice. But the real radical shift has been in where we stay when we get there.

The arrival of the 'sharing economy' has seen the emergence and massive growth of short-term apartment rental companies like Airbnb and more niche outfits such as Onefinestay. Meanwhile more traditional models change and adapt as new players enter the market; business hotels soften around the edges and resorts acknowledge that work never truly stops. Spas get bigger and restaurant options multiply. The internet allows you to swim through streams of reviews before booking a hotel. All of which means that hoteliers have been forced to seriously up their game and now strive to offer exclusive 'experiences' in a competitive bid for that prized check-in.



The Zoku loft features a smart, space-saving retractable staircase, leading to an elevated king-size bunk (Credit: Ewout Huibers for Zoku and concrete)



The loft's design makes the kitchen/work table, rather than the bed, the focus of the room (Credit: Ewout Huibers for Zoku and concrete)

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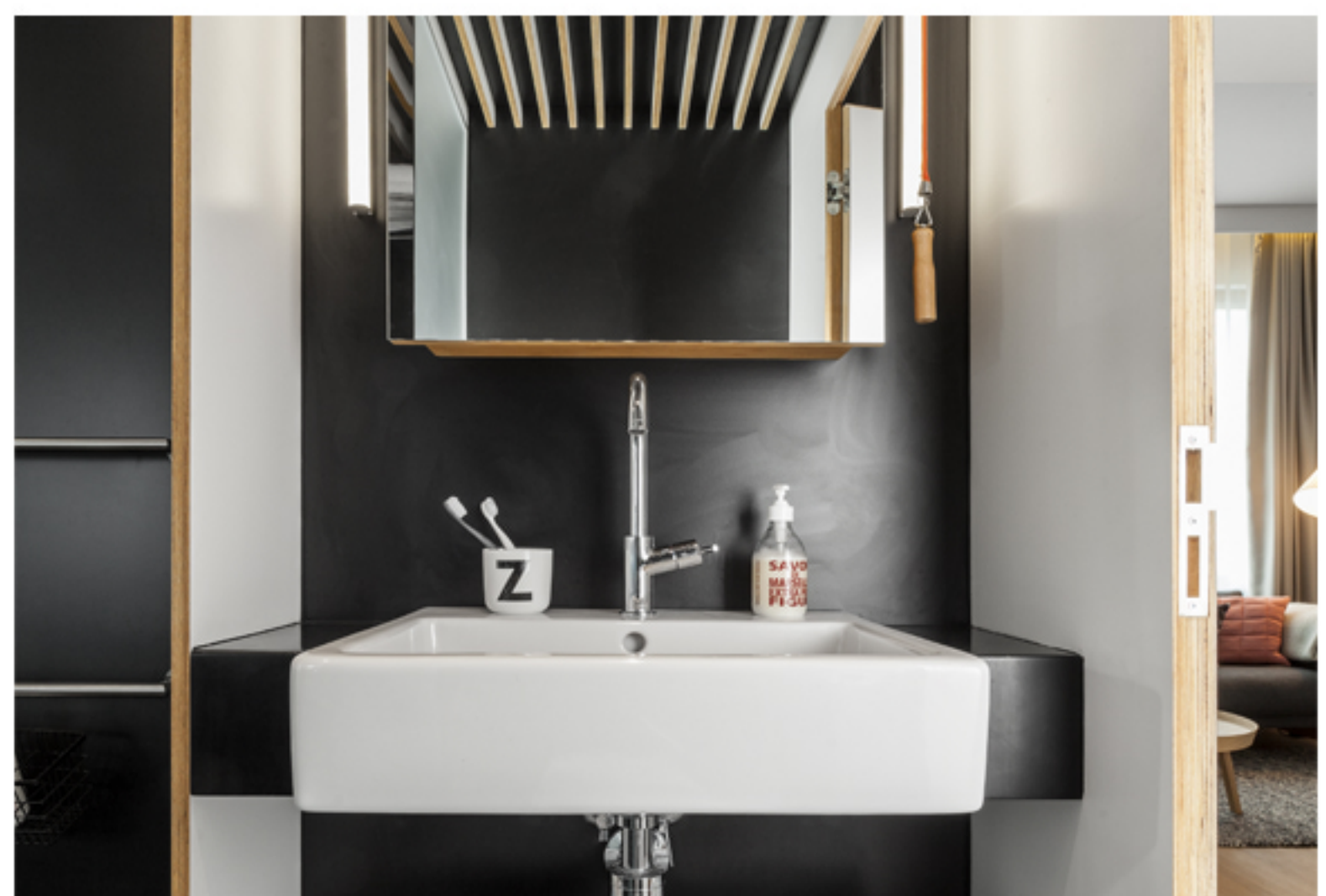
One enterprising outfit though, has come up with it what it sees as a paradigm-shifting blend of old and new. Amsterdam-based HotelsAhead – also behind the smart CitizenM concept – have concocted a brand new formula that provides the flexibility and home comforts of an Airbnb rental but keeps on-demand service and hotel buzz.

Called Zoku – which is Japanese for family or tribe – its promise is an intelligent home-office hybrid that addresses the increasingly blurred boundaries between living and working. Conceived by Amsterdam-based urban design studio Concrete, each 24 sq metre Zoku loft (with even larger versions available) comprises a fully equipped kitchen and living room, an alcove desk, smart storage space, a raised sleeping area – neatly accessible via a retractable staircase – and sleek furnishings from Danish design brand Muuto. The design deliberately makes a large kitchen table rather than the bed the focus of the room.

Communal spaces meanwhile, will adopt the social, no-boundaries model integral to the success of CitizenM. Public areas include an informal café/restaurant, tagged the 'Living Kitchen'; co-working spaces, open 24/7; retail serving food, amongst other essentials, again open 24/7; a games room; and a large 'Living Room', designed as a genuine hang-out space and social hub rather than an imposing but awkward lobby. Ping-pong and quiz nights are designed to draw in locals and establish Zoku as part of the local creative community rather than an isolated silo.



Guests can 'curate' their own art collection, if only from the hotel supply (Credit: Ewout Huibers for Zoku and concrete)



The loft is designed as a home-office away from home-office (Credit: Ewout Huibers for Zoku and concrete)

Zoku, launching in Amsterdam next May with more to follow, is aimed particularly at business travellers, or even groups of travellers, staying for more than a few days. This is a temporary project room rather than a bed for the night, though one night stays are possible. The group spent five years researching the concept before the launch, particularly looking at the needs of 'international mobile professionals' whom it calls 'global nomads'. These are a group, it says, who, on average, travel 11.4 times a years and stay 8.9 days one each trip.

Inevitably, technology plays a key role in the Zoku experience. A dedicated app will allow you to not only book housekeeping, order room service or cycle hire but will also provide an events calendar and allow you to connect with locals.

This new breed of lodging certainly challenges the traditional business model, if not actually bringing on existential crisis. 'The hotel industry itself will grow significantly in the next decade, offering great opportunities for diversification,' say Zoku founders Meyer and Jongerius. 'It will move from a mass-market offer towards niches, to meet higher guest requirements. New business models will be invented and the use of smart technology will play an important role.' The hotel room isn't dead, it has just developed multiple personalities.