

## ‘Back in Blackstone’

The century-old hotel is reborn

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Every day seems to bring notice of a hotel being created from an office building, an old industrial building, even a historic jail. So it is almost startling to note that the latest addition to Chicago’s hospitality scene is located in a structure formerly used as...a hotel. The Blackstone, a Renaissance Hotel – as it is now formally known – celebrated its official opening in late April.

The path to this South Loop treasure’s rebirth as a luxury hotel was far from straightforward. Designed in 1908 by Marshall & Fox for Tracy and John Drake (who would commission the same architects for their Drake Hotel a decade later), the Blackstone opened to great acclaim in 1910. For decades its clientele included not only the top tier of Chicago society but also international celebrities and almost every sitting U.S. president. But the string of chief executives ended with Jimmy Carter, and the last quarter of the 20th century brought only decline and a slew of building code violations.

In 1995 the Marharishi Mahesh Yogi’s Ayurvedic University bought the hotel but shuttered it four years later and hired Lucien Lagrange Architects to convert it to luxury condominiums. Lagrange was given the unusual brief of adhering to Vedic principles of architecture, which dictated specific locations for kitchens and baths and required all entrances to face east. The process went all the way through construction documents, but the asking price of \$1,000 per square foot was significantly higher than for Lagrange’s projects on North Michigan Avenue and the Gold Coast, making it far too rich for the Blackstone’s own 636 S. Michigan Ave. address.

The Prince Charming who finally awakened this Sleeping Beauty was Sage Hospitality Resources, a Denver-based redeveloper of urban hotels.

Upon acquiring the property in 2005, Sage hired the three firms with recent experience on the project: Lagrange as architect, Chicago-based Gettys as hotel planner and designer, and Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates as façade consultant. Marriott’s Renaissance brand was brought on as the franchise operator. The \$22.3 million purchase price was dwarfed by the restoration costs of \$106 million.

“This building wanted to be a hotel,” says Meg Prendergast, senior vice president and principal of Gettys, who had worked on the condo conversion project and acknowledges she would have been sorry to see the ballroom subdivided or turned into a fitness center. Lagrange agrees that all the major public spaces are perfectly suited to their original functions, which eliminated the need for the complicated structural gymnastics required by so many conversion projects.

It was the viability of these public spaces that made the project feasible, because many of them held landmark status and could not be altered. The lobby, ballroom, art hall, and barbershop are all on the National Register of Historic Places, as are the 10th-floor presidential suite and the original “smoke-filled room,” a ninth-floor suite where Republican Party insiders chose Warren G. Harding as the party’s 1920 nominee. In addition, the fifth-floor meeting space, the English Room, is a City of Chicago landmark.

Several factors aided the restoration efforts. The most remarkable one is that the hotel had never been significantly remodeled. In the mid-century decades when more prominent properties were being “modernized” with smooth, shiny surfaces, the Blackstone’s wood paneling and elaborate plasterwork remained in place. That meant that for the restoration, it was fairly straightforward to replace damaged ornamental work by

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making molds of existing features. And the hotel's renown meant that many items that were removed, such as light fixtures, were considered collectable and had appeared in recent years on eBay, where Sage was able to purchase them. It also helped that Lagrange's firm was able to obtain the original plans.

The lavish yet intimate ballroom is once again the crown jewel of the hotel. Its two-story volume spans the Michigan Avenue façade, and mirrored doors on both levels can be thrown open to a view of Grant Park. A narrow balcony along its perimeter did not meet code public access, so it is used for concealed uplighting and a mechanical plenum.

The art hall, a reception space adjacent to the upper level of the ballroom, has been restored to its original function and features rotating exhibits of work by local college students. The concourse-level barbershop, on the other hand, had long since lost its barber chairs and other fixtures and now serves as a meeting room.

The restaurant is one of the few spaces that had been remodeled beyond all recognition. Most recently used as the venue for the long-running play "Shear Madness," its cavernous two-story volume is now home to the restaurant Mercat a la Planxa.

Above the fifth story, all the guest room floors were gutted, with the exception of the two historic suites. In addition to having code violations, such as open stairwells, the floor plan was obsolete: all rooms had windowed bathrooms on the exterior walls, making the rooms feel smaller. Moving the bathrooms inboard created new layout challenges and forced the occasional jog in a guest room wall to accommodate the windows. Gettys worked

closely with Lagrange to create "the best rooms and the most rooms," as Prendergast puts it. Although they tried to standardize the room layouts as much as possible, there are 20 different configurations for the 332 rooms.

Hotel guests would probably be surprised to learn that the room floors are entirely new. The Gettys team referred to historic photos to design moldings that closely follow the scale and profile of the originals. But as in the historic areas of the hotel, furniture and textiles are deliberately 21st century. Prendergast explains the design concept as derived from luxury menswear: jolts of red, orange and citron provide spark to the neutral palette of gray, navy and camel, just as the wild color or pattern of a jacket lining often enlivens a bespoke suit. The Renaissance boutique hotel brand calls for high-volume color and large-scale pattern, which are most prominently displayed in the lobby and ballroom carpeting. The contrast of color and scale with the historic elements of the hotel "may be outside some people's comfort level," she concedes.

There is no such contrast on the totally contemporary concierge levels, the top four floors of the 23-story building. The high-ceilinged mechanical room at the top was gutted and turned into guest rooms and suites with skylights supplementing the low-set porthole windows. Outside, a green-painted metal roof recalls the original terra cotta tiles that had been replaced years ago.

The meticulously restored exterior gives no hint of the liberties taken within, just as Marshall's restrained Second Empire façade concealed an exotic and eclectic mix of interior spaces. In addition to the preserved English Room, which provided contrast to the thoroughly French ballroom, there was an Oriental Room, a Palm

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Court, and a Café Bonaparte (all long gone). Years before Walt Disney dreamed of theme parks, Marshall & Fox provided sophisticated travelers with exotic self-contained worlds within the walls of their hotels.

An article in the American Architect of June 29, 1910, praises the hotel which had won a gold medal from the Illinois chapter of the AIA. It was especially enthusiastic about the “economy, efficiency and convenience” of the floor plans and “the admirable treatment of the upper stories,” where the usual rooftop clutter was hidden under the tall mansard roof. It also noted that the electroliers on the roof could be seen for miles away. Although the replicas of these lampposts have much more competition on the skyline that they did a century ago, their return is a welcome sign that the lights are once again shining brightly at the Blackstone.”