

Garish Accents Mar Blackstone's Grand Restoration

Renovation Adds Fresh Oomph to South Michigan Avenue

Chicago Tribune
March 9, 2008
By Blair Kamin

If not for some atrocious contemporary accents in its public rooms, the \$128 million renovation of the Blackstone — home of the original “smoke-filled room,” host to presidents and celebrities, a grand setting for Chicago’s social rituals — would be cause for full-fledged celebration. After all, the project adds a new jolt of vitality to a reviving South Michigan Avenue and showcases the fabulous eclecticism of turn-of-the-century architects Marshall & Fox. But its screeching furnishings, such as the lobby carpet that resembles a psychedelic lollipop melting in a cascade of candy-colored stripes?

Oh, the pain!

The imperfect resurrection of the 98-year-old Blackstone is nonetheless miraculous, given that the hotel had been closed since 1999, including a stretch when a non-profit group associated with the Beatles’ late spiritual adviser, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, tried and failed to convert it into condominiums. Now, it holds down one of the most architecturally fascinating blocks in Chicago, its handsomely restored, French Second Empire style exterior in vivid contrast to the folded, faceted-glass facade of the new Spertus Institute for Jewish Studies just three lots away.

Opened in 1910 and located at 636 S. Michigan Ave., the 23-story Blackstone has always been a special place, renowned as much for what happened there as for the hotel itself. An honor roll of U.S. presidents, including Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, has stayed there, along with artistic figures ranging from Enrico Caruso to Mies van der Rohe.

During the deadlocked Republican convention in 1920, the legend has it, a cabal of cigar-smoking party bosses gathered in a ninth-floor suite to arrange the nomination of Warren G. Harding.

Thus was born an enduring phrase in the political lexicon — “the smoke-filled room.”

Be glad, then, that a joint venture led by Denver-based Sage Hospitality Resources snapped up the once-dilapidated dowager from the Maharishi and converted it into a 332-room Renaissance hotel, an upscale Marriott brand, that quietly opened March 1 and will formally debut April 30. Style and history like this are irreplaceable. Nor do they come cheap.

The project got an \$18 million tax-increment financing subsidy from the City of Chicago, and that came on top of \$28.3 million in a variety of federal tax credits, according to a Sage spokeswoman. But it has paid off, despite the excruciating exceptions. And the credit goes to project architect Lucien Lagrange of Chicago and two other firms: Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates of Chicago, which specializes in the analysis and



continued

Blackstone's Grand Restoration

repair of existing buildings, and Chicago-based Gettys, interior designers with a specialty in hotels.

The real stars of the show, however, are the long-gone Chicago architects Benjamin Marshall and Charles Fox, well-connected partners who created stage sets for the wealthy and powerful, including the Drake Hotel. In contrast to Louis Sullivan, who strove to create a uniquely American architecture, Marshall & Fox treated history as a great smorgasbord, skillfully plundering the styles of the past for sheer visual pleasure. Sometimes, their work feels like an architectural theme park. But they did what they did exceptionally well, and the revamped Blackstone is sure to introduce a new generation of Chicagoans to their dazzling, if backward-looking, artistry.

The show starts on the sidewalk with that robust Second Empire exterior of reddish brick, white-glazed terra cotta and a green mansard roof which reveals the spell that Paris once cast on Benjamin Marshall.

Wiss, Janney, Elstner has done yeoman work restoring and replacing thousands of pieces of terra cotta, as well as re-pointing and replacing the building's brick. True, redoing the building's muscular cornice proved too expensive. And the new mansard roof is a hardy metal, unlike the original clay tile, which couldn't stand up to Chicago's brutal freeze-and-thaw cycles. Yet the overall effect, accented by cast aluminum lamp posts that re-create the hotel's original spiky crown, is powerful.

The renovated Blackstone adds fresh oomph to the mighty wall of historic skyscrapers across from Grant Park. And with a ground-level Starbucks and a splashy new Catalan restaurant

visible through its arched windows, it can be counted on to further reinvigorate the sidewalks of South Michigan Avenue, which already teem with students from Columbia College.

To venture inside to the public rooms, however, is a very mixed bag. It is a joy to be in them, for they are beautiful and remind us of the idea that a hotel used to be a world unto itself, not just a place to hang your hat. And yet, these rooms are marred by a disconcerting tension between the faithful restoration of the hotel's parade of styles — Beaux-Arts, Gothic, Classical, Tudor — and the intensely bright furnishings selected by Gettys and approved by Renaissance, which strives for an edgy, boutique-hotel look.

The modestly scaled, walnut-paneled lobby suffers from the presence of that melting lollipop carpet. Equally jolting are the spectacular ballroom (at right), where a hot-orange carpet picturing a giant chrysanthemum intrudes grotesquely upon the wedding cake decor, and a lower-level room, a former barbershop, where a lime-green rug and walls inject dissonant notes amid walls of Doric columns.

What were they thinking?

This is what you get, apparently, when a hotel chain clings relentlessly to its brand. The interior design choices are all the more bizarre because the Blackstone is filled with other moves, such as sophisticated contemporary art by local artists, that sensitively customize the Renaissance brand to Chicago and create a truly complementary contrast between old and new.

Upstairs, Lagrange and his firm get a thumbs-up for some fine, if unsexy, work on the guest floors, which were gutted to the building's steel frame and reconfigured to meet modern standards.

continued

Blackstone's Grand Restoration

The rooms themselves, by Gettys, are anything but cookie-cutter, offering an eclectic mix of furnishings and fabrics (from Eames chairs to Edwardian stools) that flows seamlessly from the eclecticism of the hotel itself.

You can rent the understated presidential and “smoke-filled room” suites, but those with a taste for pampered, rock-star glamor will surely want to check out the 23rd-floor luxury suites that have been carved out beneath the mansard roof in space once reserved for mechanical equipment. They’ve got soaring, curving ceilings and Lagrange has nicely accentuated them with skylights that make up somewhat for a lack of panoramic views that are a consequence of this floor’s porthole windows.

All in all, then, the renovation of the Blackstone is cause to cheer. And as for those offensive carpets — well, let’s just say it’s a blessing that hotels redo their interiors every five years or so. As bad as they are, the carpets are nothing that time and an Exacto knife can’t cure.