



The
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Issue
Mild to Wild

Local Flavor

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A Taste of Life in New Mexico

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Parq Central

The relationship between preserving history and developing real estate is often prickly. In 2007, David Oberstein and Marc Bertram faced this challenge head-on. Four years earlier, they and their partners had purchased a promising property on the edge of Albuquerque's EDo district. Located in the city's Huning Highland neighborhood, the 2.3-acre parcel fronted Central Avenue on its north side. Highland Park, with its stately elms, offered cool respite directly to the south. Nearby access to I-25 could only add to the value. To top it off, the main structure—originally built as the Santa Fe Railroad Hospital, in 1926—was still in use. Rent would offset some of the investors' costs. And the property was priced to sell.

Then the tenant decided to move. What could be done with a big old building—and two more—that made economic sense? Should modernization or history win out? After much discussion, the owners settled on creating a hotel, in part because Oberstein had the skills to see the project through; he'd developed the Inn on the Alameda, in Santa Fe. Before committing, the investors wanted to gauge local support. "One of the first phone calls I made was to the Huning Highland Neighborhood Association," Oberstein says. "When I told them that we were considering putting a boutique hotel on that location, we got a tremendous response."

However, there's a good reason why the words "boutique hotel" and "railroad hospital" rarely occur in the

same sentence. One conjures images of elegant furniture and buttery croissants. The other evokes pictures of cold metal and food better left unmentioned. It would take a special sensitivity to marry the two ideas into a successful overarching concept. Enter Heather Van Luchene, ASID and Steffany Hollingsworth, ASID, of HVL Interiors of Santa Fe.

"When I first saw the inside of the old hospital, it was very dark and dismal, but that doesn't scare us designers," says Van Luchene, laughing. "It was a grand building with good bones on a beautiful piece of property." The bones may have been fine, but how would the interior designers dress the body? They, and the owners, landed upon the concept of contemporary comfort with historic elegance.

The history component would be expensive. In order to qualify for federal tax credits relating to preservation, the property would need to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. What came out of that process were several requirements that became guiding principles for the entire effort.

"The National Park Service wanted us to ensure that the historical circulation of a hospital—the flow of traffic within the space—would be preserved," says Oberstein. As a result, Hotel Parq Central guests might notice that the hallways throughout the main building are larger than usual. This is because those passageways had to remain wide enough for two gurneys and a person to be able to walk between them. Bob Heiser, senior principal with Studio Southwest Architects found creative ways for the plans to satisfy the National Park Service's requirements as well as fulfill the hotel's aesthetic and functionality.

In the Doctors' Residence, a small two-story structure built for





the hospital's physicians in 1926, there are now nine guest rooms on the main floor. Today's visitors would think there are many more.

"The false doors are here to keep the layout consistent with the original building," says the hotel's managing director, Yancy Sturgeon. "They represent the rooms that were here back then."

With a great deal of care taken by the architectural team at Studio Southwest Architects, the edifices' historical integrity has been maintained throughout the property. Much of the woodwork in the three 1920s-era buildings is original. "We even took out all of the windows and shipped them to Chicago to a specialist to insulate them better," says Sturgeon. "And then we reinstalled them."

While the historical preservation work was in full swing, Van Luchene and Hollingsworth spent their time researching two main topics: the era in which the hospital had been built and the modern essence of successful boutique hotels.

"We asked ourselves what we could do to make ours a truly outstanding hotel, one that could compete with those in San Francisco and New York," says Van Luchene. "We decided to provide a kind of unexpectedness and delight for our guests, so that they'd continue to discover new things every visit."

To do this Van Luchene and Hollingsworth focused on creating a multi-layered experience that would hint at the flavor of 1920s and 1930s while providing the level of luxury boutique hotel guests demand.

"We reference estates and mansions of the period," says Van Luchene. All the public spaces in the hotel nod directly to bygone traditions—and the feel—of drawing rooms, conservatories and other opulent rooms. Each alludes to history in its own way. "The artwork on the tables in the parlor [the breakfast room] is from an insurance map dating back to the 1800s that shows the area around the hotel," says Hollingsworth. "The metal letter 'P' on the wall came from the original hospital sign on the exterior of the building."

story by PARI NOSKIN TAICHERT
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| LEFT: David Oberstein and Bella RIGHT: Steffany Hollingsworth and Heather Van Luchene

Every guest room features a framed piece of Depression-era glass, which was a source of inspiration for the room's accent color palette. The other framed art in each room is special too. "We took an old picture of the Santa Fe Railroad Hospital and found a postcard from the era with the words 'having a fine time' and combined the two," says Van Luchene.

Even the guest business center, known as the "mail room," marries old and new. Accompanying the requisite sleek computers is a large wall collage of real newspaper articles that mark the opening of the Santa Fe Railroad Hospital. "They contain information about the weather for that day, the most popular dance steps of the era and who was serving punch at the opening," says Van Luchene.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for the designers was transforming the potentially negative aspects associated with hospitals into tangible positives for hotel guests.

"We decided to focus on healing, on its restorative aspects and serenity," says Hollingsworth. The hotel's upbeat but subdued color palette, with its restful greens, browns and whites, provides an overall calm to the entire aesthetic. The walled and beautifully landscaped private garden, the hot tub and the gurgling fountain, all harmoniously designed by Faith Okuma of Surroundings Studio, also encourages relaxation.

Van Luchene and Hollingsworth also combined a sense of history with the healing concept in other ways. Each of the guest room corridors has display niches and larger cabinets that contain different period artifacts. "We made them visual stories about smelling, hearing, seeing and how you can heal through those centers," says Van Luchene. "They're very beautiful and well done in terms of visuals, but then you start looking at them and realize

there's really a lot of information there."

Humor can be healing too. One of the areas that best exhibits the designers' playfulness is in the Apothecary Lounge. This popular evening destination, with an outdoor patio that provides stunning views of the city, is located on the hotel's top floor. The colors in the lounge reference the amber of old apothecary jars and the metallic silver one might find in a hospital. A tongue-in-cheek privacy curtain hangs on a track from the ceiling around one small drinking area. The lighting features are made to look similar to mercury glass.

While the numerous historic and healing elements of Hotel Parq Central create the well-appointed body of this boutique hotel, its good neighborliness, amenities and customer service provide the beating heart.

"We try to be very respectful," says Lindsay Joule, Director of Sales, referring to the weddings, parties and other special events at the hotel. "We don't allow DJs or loud obnoxious music in our gardens."

General Manager Yancy Sturgeon talks about creating a synergy with other local businesses. For example, though the hotel offers some food on premises, its focus isn't on dining. As a result, guests are encouraged to explore the many fine restaurants in the EDo area.

The Hotel Parq Central offers numerous amenities: sumptuous Frette linens in each room, comfortable seersucker robes, C.W. Bigelow toiletries. The complimentary gourmet continental breakfast features homemade breads and pastries. The hotel's ample parking is free as are the high-speed internet and shuttle transport to and from the airport. Guests with pets can book one of the three newly built cottages on the property. And every guest room corridor is security controlled and can be accessed only by key-card.

"We also have an exceptional staff," says Oberstein. "They truly like taking care of people and get fulfillment from serving them. That's the real reason we're ranked number one out of 145 hotels in Albuquerque on Trip Advisor and continue to receive such positive recognition."

All of these elements—a respect for the neighborhood, a celebration of history combined with a full range of modern conveniences, a focus on relaxation and restoration—add up to a wonderfully complex and layered experience that has transformed what was once a challenge into a true historic urban oasis.

The Hotel Parq Central is located at 806 Central Ave., SE in Albuquerque. 505.242.0040. www.hotelparqcentral.com.

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