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Peek inside New Orleans' Hotel Peter & Paul, one of the country's top new hotels in 2019

BY SUE STRACHAN | sstrachan@theadvocate.com MAR 18, 2019 - 7:00 AM

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Brandon Wilkins Studio made the curtains in the bedrooms and public areas of rectory, including this lounge area, and convent.

photo courtesy of Hotel Peter & Paul

When Hotel Peter & Paul opened in late 2018 in Faubourg Marigny, the attention to detail and respect for the architecture during an expansive restoration made it a hit with visitors,

locals, city preservationists and publications, including Travel & Leisure, which named it as one of the top new hotels for 2019.

The former Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church had been closed for more than a decade before the restoration started. So, for developer and New Orleanian Nathalie Jordi in partnership with ASH NYC, a design development company, there was much to do during the four years of renovation.

Early on, the developers chose to use local vendors and craftspeople.

“We always try to employ local artisans and craftsmen in each of our projects,” said Will Cooper, ASH NYC partner and chief creative officer. “Not only is it important to support the creative talents in the city in which we are working, but it also helps lend a unique hand to each project.”

ASH NYC has also developed historic properties into the Siren Hotel in Detroit and the Dean Hotel in Providence, Rhode Island.

Jordi added, “We were thrilled to work with people, many of them in our neighborhood, who felt as passionately about rehabilitating these buildings as we did. We had people working on the project who attended the school or whose parents had gotten married in the church.”

Before the Sts. Peter and Paul property became available, New Orleans-based architecture firm studioWTA was working with Jordi to find real estate in the Marigny and surrounding areas for her to develop into a boutique hotel.

“We looked at properties with her, did feasibility studies,” said Tracie Ashe, studioWTA partner in charge of the project, “but couldn’t get the numbers to work.”

Besides price, Marigny lacks the off-street parking essential to almost any size hotel.

Sts. Peter and Paul, with the valuable off-street parking, includes the church, built about 1860, and rectory, built about 1875, both designed by architect Henry Howard; a schoolhouse, built in 1900, designed by Diboll & Owen; and the convent, built in 1890.

ASH NYC was brought aboard to work with Jordi and studioWTA team, who in addition to Ashe, included design director Wayne Troyer and project managers Natan Diacon-Furtado, Sergio Padilla and Scott Crane. They worked with Sarah Norman and Wesley Palmisano of Palmisano on the hotel restoration.

“With planning a hotel, it was interesting to get into what spaces and adjustments they needed to make to make it function,” said Ashe. “Trying to fit all that they needed into these four buildings – it was a fun puzzle to solve.”

Among the biggest pieces of the puzzle was how to craft hotel rooms in the schoolhouse, where there were none before. On the fourth floor, there was no natural light, so skylights were added. The gymnasium with a stage on the third floor were transformed: the gymnasium floor into the library lounge with books supplied by Blue Cypress and rooms built onto the stage area with the exterior and doors highlighted by a bucolic trompe l'oeil by Ann Marie Auricchio of AM Creative Finishes.

Auricchio did most of the decorative finishes in the hotel. In addition to the stage's trompe l'oeil, Auricchio did the trompe l'oeil in the rectory's coffee area — though part of the Elysian Bar, the developers were mentored by Renee Blanchard of Church Alley Coffee Bar in the setup.

All the room numbers and signage are hand-painted, said Auricchio, adding that she couldn't have done it — there are 71 rooms — without assistant Maggie Bard.

“The room numbers had to be set at a specific height,” Auricchio said. Ivy J. Mabijs worked on the ceramic door numbers in the convent.

Auricchio painted the reception area and the armoires, designed by ASH NYC and made of solid Southern oak by Chip Martinson of Monkey-Wid-A-Fez.

In the Elysian Bar, Auricchio did a faux marble bar top and the finish on the Art Nouveau-inspired bar designed by ASH NYC to look like upside-down cypress tree stumps. The centerpiece of the room, the solid-looking cypress is deceiving: The structure is made of foam by Kern Studios.

“It is basically an effective way to get a higher-end look without spending thousands of dollars for a vintage bar look,” said Caskey Miller, director of business development for Kern Studios.

The studio, best known for its work on Carnival floats, used a KUKA robot, one of a few in the United States, to cut foam to 3D specifications. They worked with designer and woodworker Matthew Holdren to create just the right look. Once installed in the building, Holdren added a plaster finish to the foam so Auricchio could add the decorative finish.

The bar area “was a blank slate,” said Holdren, “and we were in the bar all summer to also craft and shape the bamboo ceiling” as well as to install latticework on the walls. Holdren's work can be seen with the cabinetry in the coffee bar and reception desk, sun room/cafe plant shelves, various mirrors and TV stands.

Food and drink in the Elysian Bar, open all day from breakfast to late evening nightcaps and light bites, is a collaboration with Bacchanal and

chef Alex Harrell. A courtyard off the side is another option to hang out, with the landscaping completed by The Plant Gallery.

The hotel's Old World elegance in the public areas and bedrooms has a feel that is at home in New Orleans. Jordi and ASH NYC found more than 770 antiques in France and Belgium to create a one-of-a-kind blend of a French country estate — for example, the breakfast area was modeled after Claude Monet's Giverny — with the lightness of Swedish Gustavian style.

Part of this visual appeal is apparent in the bedrooms, most of which are united in design by gingham fabric in blue, green, yellow or red.

Brandon Wilkins of Brandon Wilkins Studio, which includes Meryl Smith, Marcia Vowell and E. Marshall, made the window treatments by hand for the convent and rectory bedrooms, as well as for the public spaces.

Making them by hand was essential because of the climate, and knowledge of what it does: "The heat and cold warps the fabric," said Wilkins.

In the schoolhouse, Cathie Joffary of Joffary Window Treatments and Interiors worked on the window treatments, which her team installed with iron curtain rods. They also made the tablecloths and canopies that drape the steel beds by E. Kraemer Fine Metal and Woodwork, the high-end metal fabrication studio. The Kraemer team worked with ASH NYC to design the hotel's minimalist beds; they handmade 61.

For sale in the rooms are treats with a Louisiana pedigree such as Zapp's Cajun Crawgrator Chips, Kho Bo Ngoc Quyen lemon grass beef jerky, Love Cookie Butter Pecan Pralines, Those Nuts! Glazed pecans, and Acalli Barataria blend milk chocolate. For perusal or purchase is Emma Flick's "Snippets of New Orleans." A hotel directory is highlighted by suggestions from Jordi about places to go, dine and see.

Coordinating all of this was worth it. "We found there was an incredibly deep pool of local talent in New Orleans," said Jordi. "It truly takes a village to put something this monumental together, and we could not have done it without these incredible artisans as well as our amazing architect and contractor."

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