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Repotted Palmer House

Renovation transforms underutilized space, enhances guestrooms and infrastructure at Chicago's Palmer House, a Hilton hotel.

By *Monica Rogers, Contributing Editor* -- *Hotels*, 11/1/2008

In the vivacious spirit of Bertha Palmer, the art-loving wife of famed Chicago developer Potter Palmer, the just-completed US\$170 million renovation of Thor Equities' Palmer House, a Hilton hotel, restores the best elements of French Revival classicism throughout the hotel while injecting it with a new infusion of modern jazz. The refurbishment reworks underused and outdated sections of the 1925- to 1927-built hotel into shopping, dining, entertainment, meeting, workout, spa and garage space. It also puts a new face on the building and rocks guestrooms with Neo-French Baroque stylings. Approximately 1.6 million sq. ft. (147,200 sq. m), 805 guestrooms, 54 suites, a penthouse suite, nine floors of guest corridors and 124,000 sq. ft. (11,519 sq. m) of meeting space were affected during the 18 months—all without ceasing operation so that the Palmer House could keep its title of "longest continuously operating hotel in North America."



Lavender, chocolate, gold, blush and powder blue hues that appear throughout the suites reflect colors used in the lobby's original Terrazzo floor and pastel-shaded ceiling.



Celebrating the entertainment legacy of the Empire Room, where performers including Liberace, Nat King Cole and Carol Channing had long-running shows, Potter's Lounge (top) features floor-to-ceiling collages of performers and Chicago personalities on illuminated glass panels. The bar itself is a glowing, cast-glass sculpture. Support columns are enclosed in illuminated glass cases filled with white feathers—a subtle nod to the "Palmer House Girls" who entertained during the Roaring '20s.

Design at the renovated Palmer House is a fresh take on work done by original architects John Holabird and John Root, who got their Beaux Arts schooling in France and fashioned the spatially complex building. Their design for the lobby included a ceiling of Grecian frescoes by French muralist Louis Pierre Rigal, chandeliers in the Red Lacquer Room draped with garnets and public spaces lit with 24-karat gold chandeliers by Tiffany. Today, architect Loeb Schlossman & Hackl, interior design firm ForrestPerkins of Dallas and San Francisco-based restaurant designer Engstrom Design Associates have blended the classical with the more racy feel of the 1920s stylings.

Tiffany candelabras in Lockwood restaurant shine within mod, amber resin lampshades. Original brass doors designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany for the J.D. Peacock jewelry store on State Street now hang at the grand Monroe Street entrance. Painstakingly polished and restored crystal chandeliers in the State and Grand ballrooms cast light on a fresh cinnamon, ivory, espresso and nutmeg color palette. And lavender, chocolate, gold and powder blue hues in guestroom suites pick up colors used in the lobby's newly exposed terrazzo floor, which had been hidden for decades under carpeting.

Roaring '20s-inspired peacocks, for example, are everywhere. With a nod to the peacock doors at the hotel's main entrance, Forrest Perkins designed the lobby's hand-tufted wool carpets in a peacock-and-paisley pattern of blue sage, deep rust and blush. Upstairs, elevator corridors are cushioned in chocolate brown carpets woven with feathery peacock swirls, "eyes" and patterns.

Reutilized Space



Because Lockwood is in a gallery space designated a National Landmark, floors, walls, ceilings and lighting fixtures could not be altered. Design had to be achieved with rich wood, mohair and leather furnishings, screens and decorative resin shields for lamps.



A new island bar energizes both the public lobby space and the restaurant dining areas. Sight lines allow views through the entire lobby. Grecian ceiling frescoes by French muralist Louis Pierre Rigal date back to the 1920s. New paisley/peacock-patterned rugs reflect fresco colors.



The master Suite's bathroom features a deep soaking tub, Calcutta Luna marble, custom glass mosaic tile insets, custom-milled vanities and separate glassed-in-shower and toilet compartments.



Oversized ebony headboards top each bed. Rich shades of green and black, inspired by the original design, are used for top-of-bed and window treatments.



The Penthouse Suite has espresso-stained wood floors, custom handtufted wool rugs, custom mosaic tile, silk-and-glass bead wall coverings and Murano glass chandeliers in the parlor and dining room.

Some of the biggest achievements in the renovation resulted from the reappropriation of underused or neglected spaces. The bones of the "new" Honore Ballroom, with its gorgeous multi-dimensioned bands of ornate plaster crown molding, were actually discovered during construction, hidden underneath the walls of an unsuccessful restaurant venture that had once operated in the space. The new 10,000-sq.-ft. (929-sq.-m) fitness center, centered under a barrel-glass ceiling with modern white "sails" to soften the flood of natural light, was reclaimed from unused storage and roof deck space. The new 8,000-sq.-ft. (743-sq.-m) Spa Chakra, with its 12 treatment rooms, was shaped out of the former Gaslight Club space, which had closed and stood empty for 15 years.

Restructuring use of space in the lobby also has had a big impact. "Originally, the lobby did not include an easily accessed bar or restaurant venue," explains General Manager Dean Lane. "We located Lockwood restaurant where we used to have a gift shop and added a centrally located lobby bar."

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