



HAUTE HOTELS

## HOW A MID-CENTURY OFFICE BUILDING BECAME A HIGH-STYLE HOTEL

by Andrew Sessa | July 3, 2017

The trio behind the design firm Workstead have reimagined a 1960s Charleston, South Carolina, federal building as an old-meets-new emblem of a look they call "Southern modernism."



**T**hink about Charleston, South Carolina, and the architectural images that most immediately come to mind probably include brightly painted Federal row houses, brick Georgian colonials and grand Antebellum mansions — plus some Queen Anne, Italianate and Greek Revival thrown in for good measure — most filled with centuries-old American furniture and fixtures.

But clean-lined mid-century-modern style featuring big names in Scandinavia and beyond? Not so much. Which is why the city's recently opened Dewberry hotel is such a surprise.

The Dewberry occupies the former L. Mendel Rivers Federal Building, a cubic marble-and-brick structure with a street-level colonnade and long, narrow recessed windows that was built in the 1960s by the now-defunct Columbia, South Carolina, firm Lyles, Bissett, Carlisle and Wolff. Originally commissioned by President John F. Kennedy to house government offices, it did just that for some 35 years, until 1995's Hurricane Floyd rendered it uninhabitable. The building, which sits on the city's centrally located Marion Square, lay empty for nine years while locals debated what to do about it, with many considering razing the structure.

The design studio [Workstead](#) recently transformed Charleston's South Cemetery 1860s-era U. S. Marine Barracks Federal Building into the mid-century modern-revived [Dewberry Hotel](#). By The magazine's entry, [renovated city features a pair of talks by Paul Haeremán](#). All photos by [Madison Symons](#) unless otherwise noted.

Then John Dewberry came along. The Atlanta- and Charleston-based real estate developer undertook an eight-year restoration and renovation that culminated in the 155-room property's unveiling last summer.

To create the aesthetic of this ambitious adaptive-reuse project, Dewberry turned to husband and wife Robert Andrew Highsmith and Stefanie Brechbuehler and their Rhode Island School of Design classmate Ryan Mahoney, partners in [Workstead](#), a design firm that got its start in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and now has studios both there and in Charleston. The trio, whose [lighting and furniture collections](#) are offered on [Isidors](#), previously designed [Bryantown Lodge](#) in Ithaca, New York's Hudson Valley, and the public spaces at Williamsburg's [Wythe Hotel](#) — both of which had seen them turning vintage buildings into contemporary destinations.



Workstead partners (from left) [Ryan Mahoney](#), [Robert Andrew Highsmith](#) and [Stefanie Brechbuehler](#) met while studying architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design. Portrait by [Olivia Rae James](#).

"Workstead had distinctive ideas about woodwork, brass and fabrics and had proved to be especially adept at lighting selections in their past projects," says Dewberry, who met the designers through industry connections in New York. "That drew me to them for this hotel."

"Our vision was to give more than a passing nod to the federal building's mid-century modern roots," Dewberry continues, "and I do believe our collaboration proved to be winning, resulting in a notable reflection of our concept."

"We explored a balance of traditional southern materials with more modern forms that were appropriate to the era of the building," Brechbuehler says of the Dewberry's eclectic mix. "A lot of the furniture we sourced at auction," continues Highsmith, "adding new pieces from [Lawson-Fenning](#), as well as one-off designs we created specifically for the hotel."

Here, Highsmith, Brechbuehler and Mahoney expound on their vision for the building's dramatic reinvention and take us inside the completed hotel.



The hotel's owner, John Dewberry, salvaged the wood flooring in the hotel's living room from a tobacco barn in Georgia. The Workstead designers clad the space's columns in antique mirrors and designed modern interpretations of [Willy Bul Mazon](#) lighting for the table and floor lamps. The console at right is a custom version of [nightstands](#) by [Lawson-Fenning](#).





In a corner of the dining room, an [Orno 35 pendant lamp](#) by [Piero Gatti](#), purchased from [Lallem 17](#), hangs over a cylindrical table surrounded by custom stools upholstered in a [Zak & Fox](#) fabric. The vintage [Victrola Super cross-tone juke](#) came from an auction house.

### The Project

This was a huge undertaking for which we designed numerous public and private spaces within the original building's 100,000-square-foot shell, all of them exploring the concept of an aesthetic we call "southern modernism."

These spaces include the historic cherry-paneled lobby; a living room lounge surrounded by a veranda and colonnade; Henrietta's, a brasserie decorated with black-and-white concrete floors, custom Lawson-Fleming stools, [Thonet chairs](#) and church-pew-like benches; and a ballroom with white oak floors inspired by the parquet pattern at Versailles. Then there are the 153 rooms and suites, which feature mahogany [Stickley armchairs](#); marble-and-brass tables; chairs in leather, linen and mohair; and marble-clad bathrooms with cypress cabinetry.

Our purview included elements big and small. We drew plans that were highly detailed from an architectural perspective, but then also put together binder after binder of furnishing specifications. Along the way, we designed every piece of furniture in the guest rooms, most of the custom light fixtures throughout the hotel and a large number of pieces in other spaces. We even specified the fill of pillows and the pleats of curtains. We met with fabricators, artisans and the entire team over the course of some very busy years.

### The Inspiration

The interiors of the Dewberry are an expression of southern modernism — a combination of the tried-and-true materials of the South with the sturdiness of the modern building that is the Dewberry; an icon in the city with prominent views all around.

### The Art of the Mix

The items vary in their distinctive styles and materials but are linked by their domestic sense of scale. This approach to color, texture and proportion offsets the monolithic nature of the building, opening it up for the public to enjoy.

In the living room, for example, the ceiling lights take inspiration from [Italian modernism](#), and John Dewberry salvaged the wood flooring from a tobacco barn in Georgia. We clad the columns in antique mirrors and designed modern interpretations of 1960s [Paul Mayer](#) lighting for the table and floor lamps.

### The Innovation

Lighting was a major focus for us, from custom-designed pieces to architectural lighting to vintage items. In the ceiling of the living room and ballroom, for example, we designed a series of light scoops — concave bowl shapes carved into the ceiling. Inspiration for these came from Milan's iconic [Art Deco](#) Villa Necchi Campiglio. Those originals were probably carved out of plaster, but in our case, we engineered an architectural solution that comprised a prefabricated bowl form containing a socket for a bulb, which we integrated seamlessly into the ceiling.



In the bedroom, we also used a style of chandelier, composed of multiple cast-brass armatures and crystal, that was originally designed by [Josef Hoffmann](#) in 1914 and is now produced by [Woka](#) in Vienna. Woka had never created it in such a large size until it did so for the hotel.

"Our partners wanted something big and ornate," says the designer, capturing the scale of both Deeb's work. "So these pieces that were highly detailed had to be constructed perpendicular, not then dissolved together finally after hours of formulating specifications." The average sofa above only in the lobby being from the top is system.

### *The Custom Commission*

In the historic lobby, we added a new brass map of Charleston Harbor above two original [Poul Kjaerholm sofas](#) from Denmark. Local designer Peyton Avrett, whose grandmother worked in the federal office building for decades, created the piece for us, basing it on an Elliot & Ames map from 1851.



The designer's favorite guest rooms in the hotel are known as the Charleston Flats. Occupying the corners of every floor, these are the rooms to reserve. They are, "in terms of space (as large as a one-bedroom in New York City), views (toward Market Square and the Cooper River) and detail (featuring expansive hardwood floors and a claw-foot tub).



To evoke the coastal aesthetic, Charleston designer David Bostick — also the hotel's general partner, is a B&B man — created custom wallpaper depicting local beachside plants and flowers in hand-colored Seaside-chaparral colors, greens, and oranges.

(cont.)

### *The Comforts of Home*

Locals immediately started treating the living room like an extension of their own homes. Groups show up for meetings, couples for dates, four people to play cards and singles to get some work done while sipping a cocktail. The space is warm, comfortable, cozy and without pretension. People just feel welcome there.

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## BRING IT HOME

Channel the Dewberry's look with items hand-picked by Winstead's designers.



Walnut nightstands, current production, offered by Lawson-Fenning

"We asked Grant Fenning and Glenn Lawson at Lawson-Fenning to fabricate a console version of these nightstands. We were able to tailor the length and height exactly to our needs."

