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.”

Think about Charleston, South Carolina, and the architectural images that most immediately come to mind probably include brightly painted Federal row houses, brick Georgian colonnades 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 corners in Scandinavia and beyond! Not so much. Which is why the city’s recently opened Dowberry hotel is such a surprise.

The Dowberry occupies the former L. Mendel Rivers Federal Building, a cubic marble-and-brick structure with a steel-and-glass facade and long, narrow recessed windows that was built in the 1960s by the now-defunct Columbia, South Carolina, firm Lyles, Bissell, Carlisle and Woff. Originally commissioned by President John F. Kennedy to house government offices, it did just that for some 33 years, until 1990s’ 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.
To create the aesthetics of this ambitious adaptive-reuse project, Dewberry turned to husband and wife Robert Andrew Highsmith and Michelle Brechbuehler and their Rhode Island School of Design classmates Ryan Mahoney, partners in Workstead, a design firm that got its start on Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and now has studios both there and in Charleston. The trio, whose lighting and furniture collections are offered on Lobitric, previously designed Downtown Lodge in Upstate 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 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 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 bistro decorated with black-and-white concrete floors, custom Lawson-Fenning stools, Thonet chairs, and church pew-like benches; and a ballroom with white oak floors inspired by the parquet pattern of Versailles. Then there are the 153 rooms and suites, which feature mahogany Stickley armoires, 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 Dewberry, an icon in the city with prominent years 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 Evans 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 bathroom, 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.

The Custom Commission

In the historic lobby, we added a new brass map of Charleston Harbor above two original Poulsen lighting sconces 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 1861.

The designer’s favorite guest rooms in the hotel are known as the Charleston Feet. Occupying the corners of every floor, these are the rooms to reserve, they say, “In terms of space (as large as a one-bedroom in New York City), views (downtown Marion Square and the Cooper River) and decor (including expansive hardwood floors and a claw-foot tub).”

The Conforts 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 singlers to get some work done while sipping a cocktail. The space is warm, comfortable, cozy and without pretension. People just feel welcome there.
BRING IT HOME

Illuminé the Dewberry’s look with items hand-picked by Winkstead’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.”