

# Deborah Berke adapts historic warehouses to nurture a hybrid of art and commerce at **21C Museum Hotel**

By William Weathersby, Jr.

**B**outique hotels filled with arresting artwork and furniture have been a mainstay since the early 1990s, but a new property in Louisville, Kentucky, reaches further in its embrace of world-class contemporary art. The 21C Museum Hotel, designed by architects Deborah Berke & Partners, is a hybrid building that blurs the distinction between gallerygoing and overnight lodging. Carved from historic tobacco and bourbon warehouses on West Main Street, the complex accommodates 91 guest rooms, a bar and restaurant, and more than 9,000 square feet of exhibition space. Creatively balancing art and commerce, the hotel is a community crossroads that breathes new life into a rebounding urban corridor.

The hotel is the brainchild of Louisville investors and art patrons Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown, who say they wanted to catalyze a renaissance of downtown while pursuing a passion for collecting new works by living artists including Chuck Close, Red Grooms, and Andres Serrano. (The couple is also behind a proposal to build a 60-story, mixed-use complex nearby designed by the Office of Metropolitan Architecture [RECORD, March 2006, page 34].) Amassing an art collection valued at more than \$10 million while operating a bison farm outside the city, they decided to create a nonprofit museum and foundation after exploring other redevelopment options for the site, including high-end apartments. Because the combined free-admission museum and commercial hotel adapts five 19th-century brick-and-cast-iron warehouses on the National Register of Historic Places, the 21C (for 21st century)

Museum Hotel qualified for city, state, and national tax credits.

Although the disparate programs of a museum and hotel required some discrete, dedicated spaces, the challenge was to merge the functions into a unified whole, according to principal architect Deborah Berke. Integrating modern architectural spaces within the historic shell was also a balancing act. "We didn't want to lose touch with the character of the 19th-century buildings, but wanted the 'newness' of the contemporary architectural spaces to be completely clear to guests," she says. "The areas available for back-of-house functions for both museum and hotel were also tight."

Four of the narrow warehouses line up side by side, with a fifth situated at the south end of the site. Historic preservation guidelines required the architects to retain some original brick walls and timber trusses, and local codes mandated a window in each guest room. To solve the programmatic puzzle, Berke inserted two stacked volumes as an atrium within the center of the two easternmost warehouses. Excavated below grade, the lower volume is a double-height, 6,000-square-foot main

**Project:** 21C Museum Hotel, Louisville

**Architect:** Deborah Berke & Partners Architects—Deborah Berke, principal; Stephen Brockman, project architect; Terrence Schroeder

**Architect of record:** K. Norman Berry Associates Architects

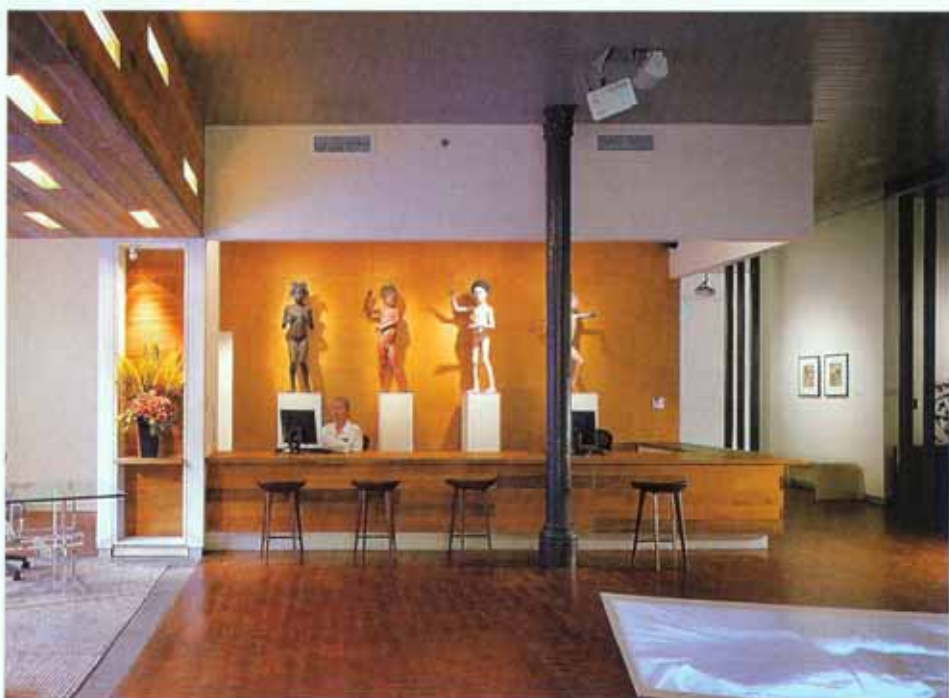
**Engineers:** Stanley D. Lindsey and Associates (structural); Kerr-Greulich Engineers (mechanical/electrical)

**Contractor:** James N. Gray Company



Four of the hotel's five restored 19th-century facades front Main Street (above). The guest-registration desk merges with art exhibition spaces (right). Accessed off the lobby,

a cantilevered stairway enters the main gallery space (opposite). A new structural-steel truss bears the weight of historic brick walls that frame the glass-topped interior atrium.





gallery that accommodates installations of large-scale art. The space is topped by a new, massive steel truss that distributes the weight of the load-bearing brick walls on upper floors. The lower level contains additional galleries, meeting rooms, a fitness center, and support areas. New concrete slabs tied into bearing walls form the upper guest-room floors.

Above the main gallery, a second enclosed volume creates a dramatic interior space visible from surrounding guest rooms, though it is not accessible to guests. A skylight at the top of this atrium allows light into the space and down through another layer of glass into the main gallery. Fluorescent lights outline new perforations in the original brick bearing walls that mimic windows. New steel trusses form a grid. The enclosure artfully overlaps a pentimento of the historic structure with a new surreal effect.

A steel-and-glass canopy inserted into the original cast-iron facade on Seventh Street marks the entry to the hotel. In the lobby, sculptures of children by artist Judy Fox serve as bold sentinels behind a low-slung check-in desk faced with reclaimed wood. Punctuated by cast-iron columns and end-grain flooring, an adjacent loftlike lobby gallery features selections from the foundation's collection and will host rotating exhibitions. Visitors descend to the main gallery via a stair to the west framed by a milk-glass railing. To the north, beyond a viewing room dedicated to video art, guests enter through glass doors into the restaurant, Proof on Main. Fronting West Main Street, the restaurant is divided into

**The main gallery accommodates art in many media (above). Above the gallery, an enclosed volume framed by sections of the original buildings (right) can be viewed from guest rooms.**





The restaurant, Proof on Main, is divided into a bar and two dining rooms with ample wall space for displaying art (left). Berke designed custom furniture for guest rooms (below), for a softer edge than the gallery spaces.

two dining areas and a bar that hew to the footprints of the original storefronts. Wall partitions provide more surfaces for showcasing art.

Artists designed chandeliers for elevator landings on each of the guest-room floors. Vitrines display art against fragments of the original brick walls. Guest rooms feature smaller framed works, while black headboards made of recycled bottles are backdrops for museum posters and prints. A calm color palette and streamlined furniture designed by Berke create an ambience quieter than that of the public spaces. "It's a visual rest from the provocative art downstairs," Berke says. You may not be sleeping in a gallery, but contemplation within a museum is only steps away. ■

**Sources**

**Furniture:** Bassam Fellows; Design Within Reach; Janus et Cie; Herman Miller; Knoll Studio; Charter Furniture; Kimball Hospitality  
**Blinds:** Hunter Douglas  
**Rugs, carpets:** Tai Ping Carpet;

*Templeton Mills*

**Wall covering:** MDC Wallcoverings  
**Lighting:** Baldinger; Niche Modern

For more information on this project, go to Interiors at [www.archrecord.com](http://www.archrecord.com).

