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A HOTEL THAT CATERS TO BOTH THE BIKER AND BUSINESSMAN: IT'S IN THE DETAILS AT MILWAUKEE'S IRON HORSE

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BY KEVIN REVOLINSKI

When you're building a hotel called The Iron Horse, selecting a site just across a bridge from the new Harley-Davidson Museum may seem like an obvious choice. But Milwaukee's Tim Dixon decided to convert a 1907 brick warehouse into a hotel two weeks before the museum's proposed address had been revealed.

A 46-year-old carpenter-turned-developer, Dixon prefers to call himself a "re-developer." His goal with previous projects, and especially with The Iron Horse Hotel, has been urban renewal that doesn't betray the spirit and history of the original neighborhood. So the brick remains as do the remarkable heart-of-pine pillars holding it all up. It's industrial chic but with an unlikely twist.

This is Dixon's first hotel and the first that gives a nod to what he considers an untapped market: upscale motorcycle enthusiasts.

"I named it the Iron Horse because it is on the railroad tracks. But there's duality there. The motorcycle is the modern iron horse."

And the duality goes beyond the name. This is not a theme hotel with vintage bikes on display and "Born to Be Wild" on repeat at the lobby bar. The hotel is looking to perform a balancing act between the typical upscale business and leisure travelers and recreational motorcyclists. It's a strange hybrid, but one Dixon is certain he can pull off.

The hotel will have everything the typical business traveler would want: business services; wireless and LAN Internet; dual-line, cordless speaker phones; and universal connectivity panels at built-in work spaces so a guest can connect a laptop to the wall-mounted 42-inch LCD TV.

Meeting space comes in an executive boardroom and tandem creative room, and the property's location, minutes from downtown Milwaukee and the Midwest Airlines Convention Center, is ideal.

So what makes this a hotel for bikers? It's in the details. "I don't want to be in your face about anything," Dixon said.

One needs to look closely to see the brake handles and transmission gears worked into the design of the lobby's four wrought-iron chandeliers. But Dixon knows that someone coming in from a day on the open road is going to see things that the average traveler won't even notice.

Dixon explained the tiled entry to a carpeted guest room: "When you walk into the room as a business traveler, you're going to appreciate that you have a bench there to put your briefcase on and three hooks.



"But when a motorcyclist sees this, he or she will know that hardy surface and that bench is a boot bench. They may be wet and dirty, and they won't want to contaminate the room. They can sit on it and take off their boots. And they'll know that those hooks are for their leather. A jacket can weigh up to 50 pounds when wet. And you don't want to hang it in a closet, because it won't dry."

Other amenities will be more obviously aimed at riders: a self-serve bike wash, a riding-accessory shop, tool kits, free covered parking exclusively for motorcycles, long-term bike storage (price to be determined) and a guest pack at check-in that contains sunblock and lip balm. Room service can serve meals around the clock or prepare a packed lunch for a saddlebag.

But because this is not simply a seasonal biker establishment, it is important that the

accommodations hit the marks—all three of them. For business travelers, the interiors are appropriate to the industrial setting, with exposed ductwork, timbers and brick walls; for the rider sensibility, there are leather headboards and fabric designs suggestive of tattoo patterns; and for the luxury traveler, all rooms have walk-in rain showers separated from the quarters with frosted glass, refrigerators fitted for wine bottles, plus the hotel offers spa services.

Local Milwaukee artist Chuck Dwyer, however, steals the first glance of a guest with his wallpaper-cum-artwork. Dwyer photographed Milwaukee women in vintage clothing, enlarged the shots, and painted them to create 18 murals that are repeated throughout the 102 loft-style guest rooms.

Dining aims between comfort food and flair, and meals—from burgers to steak and seafood—can be taken in Smyth Restaurant, the lobby bar Branded or even in The Yard, an outdoor terrace with a view of the 6th Street Viaduct, which has won national and local design awards. The Boiler Room, the hotel's answer to a pool, will be completed in 2009. Located where the name suggests, it will have a lounge-like sitting area around an oversized hot tub/chilling pool—depending on the season—beneath the original boiler pipes dripping cycled pool water.

Dixon doesn't want his hotel to be like any other. "The difference is important to the traveler. Half the time, you wake up and you don't even know what city you're in. We're trying to sell guests an experience."

Scheduled to open the first week of September, the Iron Horse Hotel is at 500 W. Florida St., Milwaukee. 888-543-4766; www.theironhorsehotel.com. Rates will range from \$179 to \$399 for rooms and \$239-\$459 for suites.

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