

500 WEST FLORIDA STREET
MILWAUKEE, WI 53204

THEIRONHORSEHOTEL.COM
1.888.543.IRON (4766)



THE IRON HORSE
HOTEL™

MEDIA CONTACT
BRIGETTE BREITENBACH

BRIGETTE@COMPANYONLINE.COM
1.414.750.7298



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second life

By Jenna Glatzer



Born to Be Styled

Milwaukee's Iron Horse Hotel retools a factory/warehouse with a souped-up blend of industrial-era timber and brick, streamlined modern furnishings and a dash of Harley-Davidson.

Not many people buy a Harley motorcycle for "research." But that's what Tim Dixon did when he found out the \$76 million Harley-Davidson Museum was moving in across the river from a building he'd just bought.

Dixon hadn't scripted a development plan for the 100,000-square-foot industrial era factory/warehouse, which housed the Berger Bedding Co. when it opened in 1907. He liked its location in downtown Milwaukee's re-emerging tannery district and appreciated its distinctive original architecture by that city's Beumming and Dick.

Then, just two weeks after the purchase in

2005, he got the direction he needed with Harley-Davidson's announced plans for a permanent hog haven. That fired up Dixon's vision for a hotel that could draw corporate types looking to cool their Beluti-shod heels as well as motorcycle enthusiasts in search of an in-spot to hang their Schuberth or Shark helmets.

The result, the Iron Horse Hotel, incorporates the right design elements to be marketed as urban with attitude. The timbered walls and exposed bricks celebrate the building's roots. And its furnishings are a bona fide boutique mix of casually elegant modern pieces with

vintage elements sourced from the Midwest to London. But how many insider five-star hotels offer an on-site bike wash, parking for motorcycles only and a tiled guest room entry tricked out to stash a guest's full leather motorcycle suit, helmet and boots?

"Our target markets are made up of road warriors of both the briefcase and the biker persuasions. Meeting the needs of both forced design creativity," Dixon says.

Hired to oversee the building's makeover was The Kubala Washatko Architects of Cedarburg, Wis. Michelle Olsen, an interior designer with the firm, says the advantages of

left | A stylized two-wheeler takes center stage in the Iron Horse Hotel's lobby, surrounded by custom leather furniture that resists scuffing by the zippers and buckles that adorn many patrons' leathers.

below | Designers retained as many original features from the century-old building as possible, including this wooden ceiling (shown here during renovation) that's visible in the guest rooms on the hotel's top floor.



the raw space were its massive windows and the warm materials: brick and timber. The openness of the factory side of the building, which houses the hotel proper, allowed for the introduction of modern technical systems without cramping either the public spaces or guest rooms.

"We love the concept of compression and relief to make an occupant aware of the actual space," she says. The designers used that idea to shape a different kind of guest room. They started by lowering the ceiling at the guest room entrance, providing a perfect location for mechanical equipment and a full raceway for ducts, water and power. Then they let the loft-like room unfold to its full 10-foot height.

Like all conversions, this one hit some speed bumps. Building codes constrained design with requirements for fire separation and acoustical separation. "We exposed the wood ceilings in the guest rooms on the top floor of the hotel only," says Olsen. "Ideally, we would have liked to have done the same thing in all the guest rooms, but because we needed acoustical separation, the ceilings in the other guest rooms are gyp board."

There were typical old-building problems, not the least of which involved the costly removal of widespread lead paint. But the exterior walls posed the biggest challenge by far, Olsen says. The need for comfort and insulation pulled in the opposite direction of

the aesthetics and texture.

"We compromised on both counts by insulating and covering the wall's lower portion and leaving the brick exposed above a Douglas fir cap," Olsen says. Heavy velvet drapes with silver sheers finished out the window edges and softened the composition, adding another layer of protection against Milwaukee's frigid winters and the city sounds of the streets beyond.

What could be preserved, was. New additions, like the lobby floor, used traditional building and sourcing to mask the 100-year transition. It's made of end-cut wood like old factories would use. So the soft part of the grain wears faster than the hard part. Dixon says he loves its character, but the uneven wear makes it "tremendously creaky."

In the guest rooms, the walls are adorned with sepia fashion photographs of vintage-clothed Milwaukeean women taken by Dixon's childhood friend, mixed-media artist Charles J. Dwyer. And in the spirit of using local talent, nearby high school students made the rough-hewn boot benches out of the hemlock timbers from the original building.

Though there are bikes and bike parts used throughout as art and accents, Dixon insists it's not a "motorcycle-themed" hotel. "It's just that when you have 350,000 motorcycle enthusiasts in your backyard each year, you want them to be comfortable," he says. **HSI**



left | All of the Iron Horse's guest rooms feature biker-friendly antechambers with wall hooks for hanging leathers, heavy-duty shelves for helmets and benches for removing and storing boots.

below | The building housing the 102-room hotel initially served as a factory and warehouse for a bedding manufacturer.

