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### GLAMOUR AND GRIT: MILWAUKEE'S BOUTIQUE HOTELS

DECEMBER 10, 2008  
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In recent years Downtown and Park East have received a rash of proposals for boutique hotels. Despite this zeal from the business community, you'd be forgiven for asking what exactly a boutique hotel is.

It's a term coined in the '80s to distinguish chain hotels from more intimately sized luxury establishments, often individually operated and sometimes designed around a specific theme. Even with their luxury status, hotels like the InterContinental and the Pfister don't bear the "boutique" tag (perhaps in the latter case because it predates the coinage of the term). As it stands, Milwaukee currently boasts only two such establishments: Hotel Metro and the newly opened Iron Horse Hotel.

Both embody popular trends in the hotel industry, including the reuse of existing structures and the application of green practices. More noteworthy is what each tells us about current perceptions of beauty. Each occupies a building belonging to an age when the machine was considered a symbol of modernity and progress, yet their conversion signifies a nostalgia-tinted look at the past. Both the Iron Horse and Hotel Metro exhibit an aesthetic drawing richly on a bygone era, and each chooses very deliberately to glorify different aspects of it.



## Weathered Charm

The Iron Horse is another story altogether. Tucked well away from the heart of Downtown, between the Sixth Street Viaduct and a railway line, its strongest link is with Milwaukee's still-developing industrial corridor—including the Harley-Davidson Museum to which it partly owes its existence.

It occupies a 100-year-old timber frame warehouse (apparently the last of its kind built in Milwaukee). A generous canopy that eagerly extends out to welcome visitors and the removal of part of the second floor to create a double-height central lobby are among the more audacious moves made by Kubala Washatko Architects, who for the greater part have kept the original structure intact, including the red brick outer walls, the sumptuous brick fire wall and the warm-hued timber columns. This tenacious adherence to the building's rigid structural system seems to have proven challenging, giving rise to gorgeously decorated but largely rectilinear, compartmentalized spaces.

Although the hotel is attuned to the needs of bikers, biker references are kept largely subtle and functional. The most blatant is the large chopper located in an area of the lobby where you might expect a roaring fireplace—a fitting concession for those keen to bask in the glow of light glancing off well-polished chrome. The clearer intent here is to pay homage to Milwaukee's industrial past as well as its high levels of preindustrial craftsmanship. Iron and wood elements abound and, thanks to this and the space's dramatic height, the lobby resembles a cross between an urban loft conversion and a cozy wood retreat.

Like the Alterra cafes, designed by the same architects, the Iron Horse strives for a weathered allure suffused with just the right amount of grit to lend it the appearance of authenticity. Nothing could be further removed from the '30s glamour of Hotel Metro. While the Iron Horse uses the building's historic origins and structure as a centerpiece, the Metro uses it as a guide. Yet, according to contemporary sensibilities, both are perfectly acceptable embodiments of style and luxury. The passage of time has worn away the industrial grime: Grit and glamour are free to join hands.

