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Southern Comfort

The Brice blends sophisticated style with Savannah's history

BY NICOLE CARLINO

The structure that houses The Brice, a Kimpton Hotel, in Savannah, GA, dates back to the 19th century. It has been home to, among other things, a hotel, livery stable, cotton warehouse and Coca-Cola bottling plant. So, naturally, all of that history had to be honored in the newly reopened and renamed property.

"At a high level, the point of view for The Brice is the idea of 'tradition re-imagined.' We were inspired by the city of Savannah, which gave us feelings such as ethereal, mystery, eccentric, intrigue, whimsical, artistic, playful, classical, dramatic and unforgettable," said Ave Bradley, Kimpton's creative director and SVP of design. "We also had a lot of inspiration to pull from based on former uses of the building."

Mitch Linder, the hotel's GM, noted that Savannah, and even the property itself, inspired the new name of the hotel, formerly The Mulberry Inn. Brice means brick in Gaelic. "Savannah has a large contingent of Irish people that helped build this city, and we wanted to pay homage to that group of people and the Savannah gray brick, so it all just tied together," he said.

The property's history as a bottling plant inspired the new entry and canopy with a factory-style storefront. "We also found a reclaimed Coca-Cola sign and transformed that into a concierge desk," Bradley said. "Acknowledging the stable that once existed in the original building, we have a few sweet references in the guest corridors to a horse that we interpreted into artwork, which we incorporated into wallcovering with butterflies circling." According to Linder, the hotel has named the horse Celeste, who's a "great conversation piece with guests."

Bradley noted that she never enters a project with a preconceived idea of what she ought to do. "I let the location speak to me instead of forcing something upon it," she explained. According to Bradley, the original building provided so many different and unique functions that it "very naturally provided a

thread for us to weave through the property, in addition to the uniqueness and truly boutique feel of the city of Savannah."

Bradley noted that the renovation was more than just a facelift. "We looked at the property not just as a typical renovation or opportunity for a repositioning, but really studied the footprint and overall function of the operation to look for opportunities," she said. The front desk and F&B areas traded places "in order to engage the corner of the building with direct access and interaction with Houston Street, which we knew was critical to the success of the restaurant." Kimpton also added about 2,000 sq. ft. of meeting space into an area that had been functioning as the restaurant and lobby. According to Linder, the hotel now has "a great flow."

Bradley noted that they chose a quiet base material palette for the hotel—floors are a light oak finish, while walls and paneling are white with trim painted several shades of gray and taupe. "We used that as a timeless palette that will never run up against trends, on which we then layered bright colors in the artwork and accessories," she said. "Art is a very important value to the city because of Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), so we wanted to have a focus on artwork across many types of media."

"We had a lot of fun working with an art consultant to develop a program that was eclectic and incorporated everything from painted canvases to sculpture and an 18-ft. mobile," she continued, noting that they had "a very amusing Sunday afternoon installation, with six guys carrying a multi-armed spinning mobile up three stories of staircase and scaffolding."

As for the furniture, Bradley pointed to the front desk. "The shape and styling of it are very traditional, but we chose to finish it in a beautiful shade of gray with pale pinky-lavender accents, which was an unexpected and fun twist," she said. "Almost all of the furniture was custom-designed and manufactured for us, except for a few pieces

of vintage furniture that we found and had reupholstered. We even kept a few of the pieces from the original hotel that we found charming and had them refinished in bright colors, which turned out to be really fun pieces with a lot of personality."

For her part, Bradley is "in love with the living room, which has a timeless and calm palette that is actually more layered and complicated to pull off than it seems at first glance." Bradley noted that, even with the serpentine bookcases and collection of artwork, "it has a layer of light-heartedness that's fun and prevents it from feeling too serious, which is really the magic of what we try to accomplish everywhere."

Another space that differentiates the 145-room hotel is the Secret Garden in the center of the hotel. "It's a truly ethereal courtyard space that we knew would be magical in the evening with lush landscaping, twinkle lights above and just the right music and cocktails," said Bradley. "It's surrounded by three-story-high drapery that shimmers with the breeze and has a mix of comfortable furniture and some wild feature chairs just for fun."

Linder noted that the Secret Garden, "which you would expect to find in many homes in the historic district, but that is unique to many downtown hotels, has a soft, warm, magical feel," and is a favorite spot among the guests. A pool renovation and development of a wedding lawn are also underway in the backyard.

According to Linder, guest reaction has been overwhelmingly positive: "It's got a warm feeling: that Southern feel with a twist of Kimpton," he said. "The designers knocked it out of the park."

"We worked really hard to design a hotel that's chic, sophisticated and contemporary, that—at the same time—feels like it belongs in Savannah," said Bradley. "It's our intention to provide a hotel that's welcoming and aspirational, but not unattainable—a higher level of sophistication, while remaining relatable. We take not being serious very seriously."



