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Restoration of the Charles St. Jail into the 298 room Liberty Hotel is complete

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In the realm of hotel architecture, it is hard to imagine a more original design scenario than a hotel carved out of an iconic 19th century jail. But when the city is one as passionate about history as Boston and the structure is none other than the storied Charles St. Jail, the vision of developer Richard Friedman comes sharply into focus. Following restoration, the building will become one of the country's most stunning and inspired reuse developments, which debuted on September 5th as The Liberty Hotel. The \$150-million property sits at the foot of Beacon Hill, overlooking the Charles River.

"The building's decade-long transformation from abandoned jail to luxury hotel is a remarkable story of commitment and persistence," said Friedman. "In this era of eco-friendly buildings and smart recycling, it is, without question, the country's most imaginative adaptive reuse project."

Completed in 1851, the building was a collaboration between architect Gridley James Fox Bryant, widely considered the cities most accomplished architect of the time, and rev. Louis Dwight, a prominent Yale-educated penologist whose travels shaped his interest in and advocacy for prison reform. Thought to be one of the best examples of the "Boston Granite Style" of the mid-19th century, the building, "resonated with a strength and dignity appropriate for the era and for Bostonians' sensibilities," said later historians.

The transformation of the site is the work of Friedman's Carpenter & Co., Inc., project architect Cambridge Seven Associates, Inc. and consulting historic preservation architect Pamela Hawkes, FAIA, of Ann Beha Architects, Inc., all of whom worked in tandem with historians and conservationists from the Mass. Historical Commission, the Boston Landmarks Commission, the National Park Service and the Boston Redevelopment Authority to ensure that the end result is a careful balance between preservation and dynamic new use.

Drawn to the building's spatial qualities, the team tapped Bryant's original architectural drawings to ensure adherence to his creative vision for the cruciform-shaped building, which was an international model for prison architecture in the second half of the 19th century. Owing much of its character to the powerful Romanesque and Renaissance forms used in its design, the building consists of an octagonal central building featuring four circular wood "ocular" windows and four radiating wings, each with large three-story arched windows highlighted by articulated wedge-shaped, stone "voussoirs" characteristic of French design.

Bryant had initially drafted a dramatic cupola, designed to bring further light and air into the rotunda. Unfortunately, it was a focal point that, at the time of the building's construction, was reduced in size to save money. In 1949, it was removed altogether. In one of many restoration decisions, the cupola was painstakingly rebuilt based on Bryant's original design.

Apart from this addition, the jail's granite exterior and expansive, light-filled interiors remain largely unchanged. The jail's central atrium was preserved and forms the core of the hotel. It features the building's trademark windows and historic catwalks. "Despite an overall modernization, many remnants of the landmark jail have been maintained to safeguard its authenticity," says Gary Johnson, AIA, Cambridge Seven Associates, referencing the preserved jail cells within the hotel bar and wrought-iron work on the windows. The jail's former exercise yard is now a private, beautifully landscaped courtyard that is destined to take its place among the beloved "hidden gardens" of the Beacon Hill neighborhood.

"Our intent was to create a quintessential Boston hotel within the framework of a true city landmark," says interior designer Alexandra Champalimaud, who was tasked with infusing the hotel with a distinctive personality that honors the building's rich history while imparting contemporary vibrancy. Exposed brick walls and a wrought iron chandelier add visual interest to the lobby while underscoring a commitment to historic and understated materials.

A Playful Nod to a Penal Past

While the developers' approach to preservation reflects a passionate commitment to authenticity, a more playful attitude defines its day-to-day style. As guests enter the building at street level, they are directed from a transitional vestibule up an escalator to the atrium and reception levels. A central embankment between the escalators is adorned with a specially commissioned mosaic of multi-textured tiles depicting historical scenes, allusions and personalities from penitentiaries and true life crimes. From a distance, the visually arresting installation echoes the rich hues of the walls while, up-close, artist Coral Bougeois' eye for detail captures intricate historical and architectural references throughout.

Whimsical suggestions to the building's former life abound, including "do not disturb" door hangers wisely worded "solitary." Alibi, the first floor bar, coincidentally is housed within the jail's former "drunk tank." It is accessed through a cell door and features original blue stone flooring. Likewise, in the aptly named Clink restaurant and bar, wait-staff wear uniforms featuring hand-stenciled "prison" numbers representing the opening, "1851," and rebirth, "2007," dates of the structure.

Trading Legendary Inmates for Luxury Hotel Guests

Once home to some of Boston's legendary inmates, now the building will be home to a more enthusiastic and appreciative audience. Within the main building, there are 18 guest rooms, as well as meeting rooms, a grand ballroom and a restaurant and bar. Across the courtyard garden, a new 16-story tower houses 280 guest rooms, adjacent to a historical gallery of images and tales from the previous 150 years.

Concierge service, valet parking, same-day dry cleaning and laundry, evening turn-down and overnight shoe shine are among the hotel's thoughtfully designed services and amenities. Guests also have access to a well-equipped health and fitness center, open 24/7. In line with the hotel's commitment to technology and luxury service, the fitness center will have a Koko Smartrainer available for personalized fitness programs. Koko is an all-in-one strength-training and cardio machine designed to develop and track individual work-outs with a "koko key" that contains a digital record of one's exercise regime. The Liberty Hotel is one of the first hotel to offer Koko and will soon be followed by additional MTM-managed properties.

A Step above Standard-Issue Prison Fare

Under the direction of the hotel's well-traveled executive chef, Michael Goodman, the Liberty Hotel features three distinctive venues for dining, each taking a creative, convivial approach. Clink bar and restaurant, located on the lobby level, serves regional specialties and imaginative cocktails such as Silky Anteater and Mumbai Express.

A self-described "seeker" and practicing Buddhist, Goodman strives to make his cuisine reflective of his travels throughout North America, Europe and Asia. Before joining The Liberty Hotel, Goodman was executive chef of Napa in Dubai and the five-star Amandari in Bali, where his cuisine was recognized in Travel + Leisure magazine. The resulting repertoire of eastern cooking techniques, exotic dishes and cultural knowledge is evident in his "grazing-encouraged" menus, which include espresso braised short ribs; foie gras and sour plum tartine; and duck confit flat-bread. In-room dining is available 24 hours a day.

Run by famed nightclub and restaurant owner, Patrick Lyons, Alibi, on the entry level, is housed where the jail's original cells once stood. It will serve as a sophisticated nightlife destination for Beacon Hill and Back Bay residents with coveted outdoor seating in the summer.

For more sophisticated fare, Liberty guests will have easy access to acclaimed Boston chef Lydia Shire's newest restaurant, Scampo. Designed by noted N.Y. interior designer Adam Tihany, the restaurant is located at the street level entrance to the hotel and is due to open later this fall.

A Captive Audience for Meetings

With an eye toward modern functionality, the hotel's 6,000 s/f of flexible meeting and event space features up-to-the-minute technology, natural light in all but one room, high-speed Internet access and embedded audio visual technology. The ballroom can accommodate up to 200 for formal dinners or 350 for receptions. Other Liberty meeting rooms range from 415 to 1,050 s/f, accommodating groups of ten to 120. The hotel's public rooms tap historic colors and patterns reflected in wall coverings, bold carpet designs and vintage wall sconces and chandeliers. In rich hues of purple and yellow, the geometric patterns draw from traditional New England window panes and door friezes to create spaces that are both lively and unassuming. A full-service business center and wireless data connections in public areas ensure that off-site business is conducted with speed and consistency.

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