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Hotels Breathe New Life Into Historic Buildings

by Lisa R. Schaolcraft

When Hotel Indigo began looking for a site for a hotel in downtown Atlanta, it turned to a former office building.

Hotel Indigo, a division of InterContinental Hotel Group Plc (NYSE: IHG), which has its North American operations in Atlanta, plans to open the 168-room hotel in mid July in the former flat-iron Wynne-Claughton building, also known as the Carnegie building, 133 Carnegie Way.

Hotel Indigo was drawn to downtown Atlanta's historic building and incorporated much of the building's history into the hotel's design and decoration.

"With this adaptive reuse, we can take an office building that has good history and great bones," said Janis Cannon, vice president of global brand management for Hotel Indigo, which has similar projects in Tennessee, Texas and Florida.

In Nashville, Hotel Indigo opened a hotel in a former bank building by Printer's Alley. In San Antonio, a Hotel Indigo opened across from the Alamo in a former Gibbs office building. Hotel Indigo also recently opened in Fort Myers, Fla., in a former post office, "From a brand perspective, why we like adaptive reuse is it fits in the essence of who we are," said Mary Dogan, director of brand delivery for Hotel Indigo, which does not have a prototype for its hotels.

Hotel Indigo wants to be in markets "that have great cultural spheres," Dogan said. Those neighborhoods have high pedestrian traffic, great restaurants, arts and culture nearby, she said.

"We want things that are oriented not only for our guests, but our neighbors," Dogan said. "But when you want to be in a neighborhood, you often have to look at adaptive reuse options."

Hotel Indigo is finding its search for adaptive reuse options "is attractive to developers, too, because it allows them to do something that is not a typical hotel," she said.

In Atlanta, Hotel Indigo is keeping the Carnegie building's link to the Carnegie Library that was once across the street, Cannon said. The Fulton County library now sits where the Carnegie Library once was.

Guest room bedding emulates the patterns of old book linings and bookcases are in the lobby. Hardwood floors in the guest rooms are covered with area rugs that have abstract old printing presses on them. Murals in public spaces and guest rooms also follow the abstract printing press design.

Even the suites, named after famous authors like Ernest Hemingway, give a nod to literature.

"We'll have many hotels in Atlanta when all is said and done," Dogan said. "We want each hotel to represent the few blacks around them."

Hotel Indigo is not alone in looking at ways to create hotels in buildings that had a previous purpose.

The Glenn Hotel in downtown, The Ellis Hotel in downtown and **The Artmore Hotel** in Midtown all were in buildings that once had other uses than hotels.

"As existing buildings become available for sale, there is a natural inclination for nimble real estate developers to consider alternative uses," said David Marvin, president of Legacy Propqrty Group LLC, which redeveloped and owns The Glenn Motel.

That's basically what happened with The Glenn Hotel, at 110 Marietta St., he said.

Built in 1923, the building, now home to the 110-room Glenn Hotel, was up for sale in 2003, but the brokerage firm was plying it as office space or condos, Marvin said.

Of all the requests for proposals the brokerage firm got on the building, "we were probably the only one that looked at it as a hotel," he said. "We saw it as Atlanta's first true boutique hotel."

Atlanta, which is a sophisticated hospitality market, had been slow to deliver boutique hotels, Marvin said, which tend to be small, more intimate hotels,

The building, which had been vacant for 20 years, "was in decent shape, but it had a lot of issues, so it was a pretty challenging development project," he said.

The Ellis, at 176 Peachtree St., is now in what was the former Winecoff Hotel, but prior to becoming The Ellis, the building "was a Baptist rest home," said Stacy Thaler Martin, general manager of the 127-room hotel. "Then it was closed for 25 years."

The building, built in 1913, began as the 15-story Winecoff Hotel. Touted to be fireproof, the Winecoff caught fire in December 1946 and claimed 119 lives, making it one of the worst hotel fires in history.

"This building, even though some of its history is not great history, does have a story," Martin said. "And it has good bones."

After a \$28 million restoration, The Ellis opened in 2007.

"People who love The Ellis, love it because it is unique," Martin said. "If you like going to the Sheraton or the Marriott and like big square rooms, The Ellis is not for you. We cater to those who like more than a square box to stay in."

One of metro Atlanta's newest boutique hotels was also once a hotel, but got its start as an apartment building.

The Artmore, which opened in May 2009, started out as upscale apartments before converting to a hotel in the 1980s, said General Manager Michael Halpner.

By the time the building at 1302 West Peachtree St. became the Best Western Grenada Suites, "it languished, as did many historic buildings, in the 1970s," he said.

Jamestown and Urbana Realty Advisors LLC bought the building - built in 1924 with a Spanish and Mediterranean design - In 2006.

"There is so much character in a historic building," Halpner said. "The original architecture at The Artmore is beautiful and it would have been a shame if someone had come in and just razed the building."

Boutique hotels are "usually one-offs, just as older buildings are," he said.

As the economy begins to improve, Martin thinks there will be more hotels opening as adaptive reuse projects.

"There is so much character," she said. "You can have a lot of fun with an old building. If you are a developer and you want a project out of the ordinary, it is something you look for. I honestly think we will see more, I just don't know when that will happen."

Legacy Property Group's Marvin thinks for hotel development especially, adaptive reuse is one way to add product. "Hotels, like many types of construction, are out of favor right now," he said. "To get funding [for new construction] is a real stretch."

While he doesn't anticipate a lot of projects to begin right now, adaptive reuse of existing buildings is a much more cost-effective way to get a project done,

"If the building shell is supportive of the adaptive reuse, that is a great way to deliver the finished product at a lower cost and sometimes with some terrific character and architectural quality that is beyond new-build budgets," Marvin said. "I think that is what we showed with The Glenn. We ended up with a little gem that has all the patina and great feel that was lovingly constructed in the 1920s. You just couldn't buy that kind of character."

Breathing new life

Developers have been revitalizing some of Atlanta's most historic buildings - transforming once dilapidated properties into posh boutique hotels. Those hotels include the following:

Hotel Indigo

Location: 133 Carnegie Way Building: Old

Carnegie building

Number of rooms: 168

The Glenn Hotel Location: 110 Marietta St.

Building: Former Glenn Building, constructed in 1923

Number of rooms: 110 The Ellis hotel

Location: 176 Peachtree St.

Building: Former Winecoff Hotel, built in 1913

Number of rooms: 127 The Artmore Hotel

Location: 1302 West Peachtree St.

Building: Originally an upscale apartment building, constructed In 1924 Number of rooms:

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