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The Pump Room Gang

It used to be Bogart and Sinatra-now it's George Yabu and Glenn Pushelberg at Ian Schrager's Public Chicago.

By Thomas Connors -- Interior Design, January 1, 2012



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The Pump Room is a restaurant steeped in Chicago lore. In the 1940's, Frank Sinatra and Lana Turner held court in the storied Booth One, taking calls on the table-side telephone. In 1959, the restaurant's home, the Ambassador East hotel, even had a cameo role in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*. VIPs favored the hotel's low-key environs, a posh residential neighborhood a quick cab ride from the excitement of Michigan Avenue.

Over the years, however, the luster faded, making the dowager property ripe pickings for the sort of transformation that Ian Schrager specializes in. Having no apparent personal nostalgia for the Ambassador East and knowing a thing or two about chic hotels, Schrager decided to recast it as the flagship for his latest brand, Public. Ian Schrager Company president of design Anda Andrei accomplished this by engaging not one or two but three Interior Design Hall of Fame members.

Michael Gabellini's firm, Gabellini Sheppard Associates, strategized on branding and program at the outset. A prime directive was to keep the look of the Public Chicago from overshadowing its primary function as a comfortable, efficient hospitality destination where the design is good, versus gimmicky, and the focus is on service. "One thing you'll find in Schrager hotels is that they encourage guests to be more hushed," Gabellini adds. Kimberly Sheppard notes, "Softly reflective surfaces, like the limestone and antiqued mirror we recommended, help achieve this."

Ensuring that the revived property would successfully manifest that vision was a job that fell to Hall of Fame members number two and three: George Yabu and Glenn Pushelberg of Yabu Pushelberg. "There was a lot of debate," Pushelberg notes. "But we were all tuned in to the same frequency." Although the project did not involve reconfiguring spaces, for the most part, the reinvention was thorough.

The revamped reception station is a row of four desks clad in mirror-polished stainless steel—their cube form inspired by Donald Judd, their finish by the monumental Anish Kapoor sculpture in Millennium Park downtown. In reception as well as in the lobby overall, the neoclassical detailing, once dark wood, was painted ivory, and the marble floor, with its rugs, was replaced by a concrete facsimile of limestone, left mostly bare. The corner of the lobby known as the "living room" offers plenty of upholstered seating appropriate to that name. Meanwhile, nearby, an iMac-topped refectory table serves as the concierge station.

Beyond the lobby, in the library, original paneling and moldings join additions in reclaimed wood: wide strips on the columns and boards on the floor. A fireplace with a deco-esque concrete surround is straight ahead. To the right, a bar beckons with quick bites and coffee in the morning or cocktails later.

When it came to the Pump Room, Schragger felt no compunction to tread lightly. Previously reached by a staircase tucked away by the elevators, the restaurant can now be entered either from the front of the hotel lobby or directly from the street—the latter route lined with a panoply of the celebrity-studded black-and-white glossies that have long graced the restaurant. Its lounge, formerly dominated by a large U-shape bar, now feels more expansive with a smaller bar housed in a gold-leafed niche and, outside it, a cluster of tables. The dining room's arrangement of tables and booths echoes the old decor. Overhead, taking advantage of the 18-foot ceiling, the mood updates considerably, thanks to a constellation of glowing resin orbs.

The 285 guest rooms, done in a spectrum of pale shades, are almost shockingly simple. A platform bed with a rift-cut bleached-oak headboard, inspired by a John Pawson design in Schragger's home; a stripped-down steel desk; and a dark walnut-stained wooden chair are the primary furnishings. "There's an effortless quality at work here, a release from the over-styled that returns Ian to his roots with Andrée Putman at Morgans in New York," Yabu suggests.

Seductive or witty flourishes, the kind that have long characterized Schragger boutique hotels, aren't entirely absent at the Public Chicago. A Brobdingnagian chesterfield in the library must easily seat 20. In the walnut-paneled screening room, huge seating pods, L-shape sofas, and loads of pillows and sheepskin throws suggest a 1970's rumpus room on steroids. In guest rooms, vintage postcards of jazz greats are placed randomly on the walls, smack against a door frame or off in a corner. Nonetheless, the muted design is different from the dramatic approach employed by Schragger over the years. Yabu Pushelberg successfully telegraphs not so much hipness or luxury but rather a sense that, of course, a hotel should look like this.

Photography by Michelle Litvin.

PROJECT TEAM

cherie stinson; robert walshaw; eduardo mora; crawford noble; heidi rose; carrie stinson; jennifer lem; lisa ho; kevin storey; jennifer mckeand; yabu pushelberg. isometrix lighting + design; tillotson design associates: lighting consultants. bowman, barrett & associates: structural engineer. wma consulting engineers: mep. pepper construction group: general contractor .

TÉLIO: CURTAIN FABRIC (RESTAURANT).

ARTCO INTERNATIONAL: CUSTOM TABLES (RESTAURANT, LIBRARY).

KRAVET: BANQUETTE FABRIC (RESTAURANT); SHEER FABRIC (GUEST ROOM, SUITE).

HOLLY HUNT: SOFA FABRIC (LOBBY).

CREATIVE MATTERS: CUSTOM RUGS (LOBBY, LIBRARY).

LOUIS INTERIORS: CUSTOM SOFAS, CHAIR (LOBBY); CUSTOM SOFAS (LIBRARY, GUEST ROOM, SUITE); CUSTOM STOOLS (BAR).

CHRISTIAN LIAIGRE: CHAIRS (CONCIERGE); LAMPS (LIBRARY).

ARTISTIC FRAME (212.289.2100): CUSTOM CHAIRS (LIBRARY).

CONCRETEWORKS EAST: CUSTOM RECTANGULAR TABLE TOPS.

DIMORE STUDIO: CUSTOM CEILING INSTALLATION (RESTAURANT).

EJ INDUSTRIES: CUSTOM BOOTHS.

COMMERCIAL FURNITURE GROUP: CHAIR (GUEST ROOM).

UNIT FIVE: CUSTOM BENCH.

NIEDHARDT: CUSTOM READING LAMPS.

FRETTE: BED LINENS.

MEUBLES SAINT-DAMASE: CUSTOM BED (GUEST ROOM); CUSTOM TABLES (GUEST ROOM, SUITE); CUSTOM BENCHES (SUITE).

IWORKS: CUSTOM FLOOR LAMPS (GUEST ROOM, SUITE).

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