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Ian Schrager's New Hotel: Public, Chicago

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For his latest act, Ian Schrager debuts Public, Chicago, a new hotel in the same building as that legendary celebrity hangout, the Pump Room.

From [December 2011](#) By [Kate Betts](#)

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It's a sunny september morning in [Chicago's](#) ritzy Gold Coast neighborhood, and Ian Schrager is up early, fiddling around with a glass vase holding a single, giant elephant's ear leaf in the lobby of his new hotel, Public Chicago. Dressed in his uniform of polo shirt and jeans, Schrager bounces around the airy, bright lobby of the 1926 landmark building, getting ready for the first guests to check in and check out his latest concept.

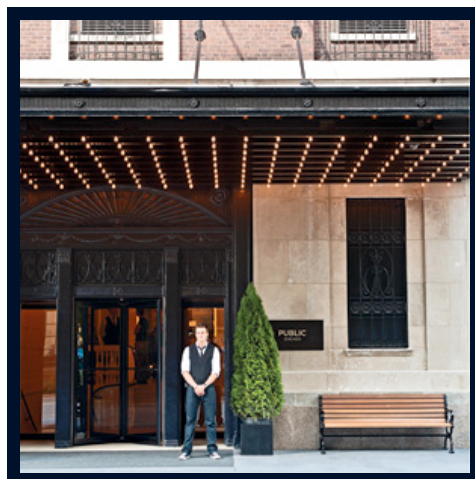


Photo: Greg Ruffing

"The operation of a hotel has a million moving parts," he says. "That's hard for a perfectionist." The 285-room Public, formerly the Ambassador East, is Ian Schrager's first project as an independent hotelier since the market crash in 2008. And, Schrager adds, it's probably his most personal. Instead of hiring a famous designer like Philippe Starck or a famous artist like Julian Schnabel, he came up with the design himself, with lots of help from Anda Andrei, the sharp-eyed in-house architect who has been with him since the mid 1980's, and other members of his long-term staff.

The guy who invented the velvet rope at Studio 54 and the slick boutique hotel is trying on a whole new look: the no-frills hotel. Schrager sees the Public brand as a reflection of a growing trend in the hospitality business, one that favors inclusiveness over exclusiveness. The idea is to combine the service of a Four Seasons with the practicality and value of "select service" brands such as a Courtyard by Marriott and Hilton Garden Inn (double rooms at the Public start at \$135). Schrager compares the concept with the retail experience at an Apple store: "You get what you need and get rid of what's unnecessary. There's a paradigm shift in this country," he explains. "People want to be more modest. Even if they have the money, they don't want to spend it extravagantly anymore. I don't think luxury is based on what you pay for something," he says. "It's about an experience." And this new experience is decidedly democratic. Just to prove how "public" the Public concept will be, Schrager set about renaming the Pump Room, the hotel's restaurant, which was once a favorite hangout of celebs such as Marilyn Monroe and Humphrey Bogart. As a gesture of respect to the foodies of Chicago, he went to the website and asked people to vote on the name. The overwhelming choice: keep the Pump Room.

Although he liked the bones of the building, Schrager wanted to open up the space between the restaurant and the lobby. The gestalt might be no-frills, but Schrager still wants people to hang out. "This is the opposite of Philippe Starck," he says. "It's more like Andrée Putman in the very beginning. Design is no longer enough. There has to be an ethos, too." And so green marble floors

gave way to integrated concrete; a handful of old chandeliers were reinvented as one giant cluster of crystal hanging by the entrance. The lobby serves as a kind of community office, with a huge Christian Liaigre table housing five MacBook Pro computers. It's a self-serve mentality, offered up with a dose of signature Schrager wit: a giant clock behind the concierge desk has a minute hand that moves backward. Schrager calls it his Benjamin Button clock.

Back in the lobby, Schrager is finally satisfied with the placement of the leaf vase and moves on to the Library, a coffee bar by day and cocktail lounge by night. The walls are lined with tongue-in-cheek portraits by Dutch photographer Hendrik Kerstens in the style of Vermeer, except instead of pearl earrings, the models wear curlers made of Coca-Cola cans. Both the portraits and the columns fashioned from reclaimed wood were inspired by the work of Joseph Bennett and the production team behind the popular Alexander McQueen exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art ("That guy is a genius—he's going to do my next hotel"). Although the room seems the perfect mix of cozy and hip—a fire in the fireplace; board games stacked on a sideboard—something about the coffee bar, which was inspired by Viennese cafés and serves coffee from La Colombe, is not quite right. Schrager and Andrei zero in on a plastic cup of yogurt sitting on top of the coffee bar. Schrager is outraged by the \$9 price tag. He also hates the way a wire egg rack is placed on top of the glass case where the muffins and bagels—baked fresh every morning—are displayed.

In his quest to keep extra guest charges and an overpopulation of bellhops to a minimum, Schrager has worked hard to lower prices everywhere. There are no fluffy terry-cloth robes (available only on request), no irritating mini-bars stuffed with gross chocolates (just Popchips, peanuts, Bombay Sapphire gin, and a wool knit cap, which, in Chicago, is probably the smartest idea yet). "You won't find \$5 Hershey's bars in the mini-bar," says Schrager, who admits that he is obsessed with retailers like Trader Joe's. "All sorts of people shop there—rich, poor. I like that they have a very specific point of view and not a lot of choice. It's reasonably priced but no less sophisticated."

And so every room in the Public is impeccably designed, but this time instead of three-legged chairs there are comfy linen-covered armchairs that are replicas of one Schrager found at a flea market in Paris. Walls are bare but for a huge flat-screen TV, an oversize clock, and a series of Jean-Baptiste Mondino photos of cows, a wink at Chicago's famous meat market. Wi-Fi is free. Room service comes in a brown paper bag instead of on a silver tray. You can take it to go or eat it in the room.

"I love it," Schrager says. "When I started in the business you were paying a \$7 delivery charge and room service took 25 minutes. This arrives in six minutes, and I keep pushing the prices down. I call it bankruptcy prices." He plans to take them—and Public—to several more cities, including New York and London.

But perhaps the biggest coup of all—and one that will no doubt please his neighbors—is the food. And Schrager the perfectionist obsessed for a long time to get it just right. For both room service and the restaurant, he wanted the food to be simple, delicious, healthy, and not expensive, so he called in one of his favorite chefs, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, and asked him to bring ABC Kitchen to Chicago. To arrive at a menu that features small "market table" appetizers and such Jean-Georges favorites as roasted beets with house-made yogurt, crab toast with lemon aioli, and Wiener schnitzel, Schrager insisted on keeping the prices as low as possible: only one dish costs more than \$30. The signature Jean-Georges dessert—an unbelievably delicious salted-caramel ice cream sundae topped with candied peanuts, caramel popcorn, chocolate sauce, and whipped cream—is just \$7. Perhaps as a gift to Jean-Georges, Andrei and Schrager reimagined the Pump Room with the requisite group table and signature booths, all topped off with a giant room-size constellation of softly lit resin globes.

Back in the lobby on opening day, Schrager does a discreet double-take when he spies four burly guys with backpacks checking in. From the look on his face, it is clear Ian Schrager still has to acclimate to the sight of the "public"—regular people, not hipsters—in one of his hotels. With their Patagonia fleeces and North Face backpacks, these guys would never have made it past the proverbial velvet rope. But they definitely shop at places like Trader Joe's.

Public Chicago 1301 N. State Pkwy.; 888/506-3471; publichotels.com; doubles from \$135.

Kate Betts is the author of Everyday Icon: Michelle Obama and the Power of Style.



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