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SHAGADELIC

Virgin Hotels' U.S. debut restores an art deco landmark in Chicago, with a wink.



THE BAR IN VIRGINNS COMMONS CLUB.
COURTESY VIRGIN HOTELS

Lest you think Virgin Hotel's new outpost in downtown Chicago is a mild adaptation of its parent company's ribald corporate persona—tempered for the historic confines of its art deco host—just know the lounge features a plush, circular “shag room.”

The first U.S. location of Virgin Hotels inhabits the Old Dearborn Bank Building at 203 North Wabash Avenue in Chicago's Loop, one of only two office buildings designed by architects Cornelius Ward and George L. Rapp. Finished in 1928, the 27-story building was named a local landmark in 2003.

On one hand it seems an unlikely fit for Virgin, whose bushy, hang-gliding CEO Sir Richard Branson exudes an aesthetic and sense of humor that draw more on his playboy persona than his royal honorific. But there is whimsy in the original building, too. Facade ornaments depicting peacocks, acorns, and mustachioed old men mesh with the hipster sensibility informing some of Chicago's ongoing boom in boutique hotels. “It was clear that they didn't want a hotel that was Britannia, over-the-top,” said Diego Gronda, managing and creative director at Rockwell Group Europe. “They wanted it very respectful, but with a wink.” The design directive, Gronda said, went something like, “Don't add TNT and destroy it, and don't be boring.”

Chicago architecture firm Booth Hansen, led by Marshall Butler, headed up restoration efforts, which were demanding after years of poor retrofits and neglect. Many of the historic features of the original bank had been covered up, battered, or both. Designers made silicon casts of intricate ceiling panels,



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replacing shattered tiles that in some rooms made up more than half of the ceiling. Original terrazzo floors and a stately curved stairway greet entrants who enter beneath a relatively understated overhang.



Once inside the lobby, however, guests are as likely to notice the cheeky art as they are the Jazz Age grandeur. A custom-designed red carpet flows down the stairs, spilling into a blob by the entrance like a giant pool of paint. Famous paintings are restaged with stuffed animals behind the check-in counter, an old cigar store that now accommodates guest interaction via smartphone.

That chic enthusiasm dulls a bit at the threshold to the 250 “chambers,” or guest rooms, giving way to a subtler palette mostly devoid of splashy art pieces. Though area rugs depict abstractions of London’s Tube and signature red phone booths, cool creams, and whites aim for serenity in what Virgin’s PR material describes as “home away from home” for its frequent travelers. The floor plan responds to a uniformity of business-class accommodations. The roughly 300-square-foot rooms open onto a small entryway with a sink, split closets, make-up table and mirror, toilet, and shower with a tile bench. That area closes off with a shade, leaving the bedroom a separate retreat. In an interesting touch smartly cornered by Rockwell Group Europe, custom beds feature a bonus headboard at the bottom corner for guests to lean against while reading or surfing a mobile device.



The heart of the hotel is the Commons Club, a double-height space beginning on the second floor that features a towering, elliptical bar, a cozily furnished “funny library,” and the moody “shag room” that can be closed off with a curtain and illuminated by an LED disk hanging overhead. Wary of overpowering the space with Virgin’s signature red, Gronda instead snuck it into the details in the carpeting—though it still screams in leather touches on the center bar, which frames a kind of

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exploded chandelier made from silver balls with zinc and long mirrors. Amid all this, the floor plan maintains a clean sightline from the Shag Room at the building's south end to the daylight brushing the exposed kitchen against the northern exterior wall.

Though surely over-the-top by purist standards—ceramic molds of English bulldogs are chained outside pet-friendly rooms; Branson's self-explanatory art installation "Large Ball of Tangled Chargers" adorns the concourse of the business floor—Rockwell's marriage of old and new befits the boutique hotel model and the historic setting alike. Is it the start of a British invasion? Virgin plans to open another hotel in Nashville next year, and has set its sights on New York for 2017.

Chris Bentley



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