

COOL HUNTING

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The Dean Hotel, Providence

This former church mission and brothel is transformed into a design-minded hotel

By NINA SHIN



Massive, corporate hotels pepper downtown Providence, Rhode Island's skyline, and these concrete structures are the first to greet visitors as their cars exit off I-95. The downtown area is prime lodging grounds, as the Rhode Island Convention Center and the Dunkin' Donuts Center are steps away. Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design are also only a 15-minute walk up the hill. So when we entered into The Dean Hotel, we weren't sure if we had arrived at the right place.

A transparent bookshelf shields the lobby area, stocked with tomes from Symposium Books (a local shop just a

few blocks away on Westminster St.), keeping it a bit more private. The pink light radiating from a neon sign reading "FINE" creates the ambiance of a boutique store. Vintage furniture—like theommel horse repurposed as a bench—rests between more contemporary flourishes, like a blue velvet sofa and video artwork. Throughout the hotel's common areas and its 52 rooms, each furnishing and piece of art has some kind of story—whether it's been custom-made by a local artist or hauled from a flea market. That is The Dean Hotel's charm: a hotel that uses its proximity to talented local artists and craftspeople to create something that



feels fresh yet homey. It's an acknowledgment to the city's historic roots, artistic community and collegiate surroundings.

The Dean Hotel is a project helmed by Brooklyn-based ASH NYC, a hybrid interior design and real estate developing company co-founded by Ari Heckman (a Providence native) and Jonathan Minkoff. For their first hotel, they've chosen a building with a very interesting history. Starting out as a mission house built by the Episcopal Diocese to provide shelter for those hard on their luck, the building functioned as a strip club and brothel called The Sportman's Inn until it was purchased in 2012.

"The design hypothesis was that we wanted to restore the building that was built in 1912 back to more or less its original condition, from an exterior perspective," Heckman tells CH. "The background canvas was to create this fresh, clean but historically accurate space—but our general aesthetic is, we don't really like things that feel too much of one era, it needs to feel fresher. We wanted to have an interplay between this historic building, bringing in pieces from all different time periods from Europe, and layer in more modern art and design touches where we thought it was appropriate, so that it feels like a live, new building and not a museum relic."

Visitors would never guess the building's backstory when looking at the rooms now, though the footprint has been preserved from the original church mission—meaning that the rooms are all shapes and sizes, so each stay at the Dean will be a little different. The original cage elevator—a tiny cab that probably fits two people max—has been restored (albeit still temperamental and quirky), the lobby's tiled floor is still original and the coffered ceiling

has been restored. In somewhat of a cheeky throwback to its brothel origins, the hallway lights were hand-tinted by creative director Will Cooper to give off a pink glow, along with neon signs on every floor, creating a mysterious and seductive vibe. "It felt dishonest to gloss over that; and also, it's kind of a fun thing. So you had this vast disconnect between its two predominant uses in history and we kind of wanted to play that up a little bit," says Heckman.

In the lobby area is a coffee bar serviced by Bolt Coffee Co—it's actually their first (and currently, only) storefront, as they originally started out as a coffee cart that used to cater events. In the morning, we were greeted by fresh pastries and served coffee by Bryan Gibb, one of the proprietors himself. Currently in rotation are beans from Coava (Portland, OR) and Square One (Lancaster, PA), and you'll probably have to fight for a seat at the communal table as the space has already proved popular with locals.

By night, when the coffee bar closes, hotel guests and locals start drifting into Faust, a German-style beer hall that serves sausages and Bavarian pretzels. And there's plenty more places to drink without ever having to leave the building: the Magdelene Room serves liquors and cocktails in the back room, separated by a heavy curtain, and a visit to the lobby restroom reveals a Koreatown-inspired karaoke bar, The Boombox, with soju and sake-based cocktails. The latter is run by Ethan Feirstein, who also owns the popular downtown bar The Salon, and all of these food and drink locations are managed by their local owners.

"We have a really wide variety of rooms, rooms that have single bunks to king suites that have king beds and a sitting area." As a result, Heckman says, they've been able to attract just as wide a variety of different types of people as well, who are bound by the common denominator of



wanting to stay some place independent with a creative focus. Their low rates (starting at \$79 for a single bunk room) offer the opportunity for staycations, and even people driving over from nearby Warwick or Pawtucket or even Boston can make that spontaneous I AM decision of grabbing a room and crashing the night. Rooms with double bunks fit four people and start at \$89—perfect for the touring band that’s playing at The Met or a family with kids—and leaves guests with more money to spend on their night out.

The minimal furnishings and dark hardwood floors are relaxing on the eyes; the decor blends local with luxury. Concrete end tables, shaped like elephants, were sculpted by local artist Will Reeves, a RISD graduate who now teaches at RISD/CE, as well as blacksmithing courses at the Steel Yard. The bed-frames, including the steel bunk beds, and desks were also made at the Providence Steel Yard. From the woven blankets by Maine’s Brahms Mount and handmade cashmere ones from LA’s The Elder Statesman (a 2012 CFDA Vogue Fashion Fund winner) to the custom-designed lighting fixtures—every piece has some kind of story.

There is a lack of items that would typically identify the space as a hotel room: the hairdryer is hidden under the bed, no Bible (copies of Surface Magazine and n+1 in our room instead), no dresser and no phone. Recognizing the fact that people rarely use hotel phones as well as the fact that most of us carry around cellphones; The Dean has opted not to install a pricey phone system throughout the hotel, passing the savings onto guests. The number for the front desk is written down for you and another option is to use any of the red phones in the hallways. The result is that you forget you’re in a hotel room, and when you wake, it feels a bit like a studio apartment in NYC—with way bigger windows.

On the writing desk, there’s a tray of treats from mostly local vendors such as Rip van Wafels (started by a Brown student) and Coolhaus chocolate bars. The smartest addition, however, is the “intimacy kit” (condoms, lubricants and mints)—though all of the above comes at a small price.

While still working out some kinks since its opening last month (the pitch in the open-style showers, for example, turned out to not be steep enough to drain the water, so they’re in the middle of adding stone curbs to each shower to prevent flooding) and despite our frustrations with

the ambiguous symbols on the air conditioning/heating system, The Dean is a welcome addition to Providence that feels rooted in the community, instead of feeling like a forced, contrived implant.

It’s impossible not to compare The Dean to other boutique hotels like The Ace Hotels and The Standard—and even the recently reviewed CitizenM—that are transforming and evolving the idea of traditional hotels. Heckman cites the late Alex Calderwood as a mentor (having first met him in 2008) and the Ace Hotels as a great source of inspiration for The Dean—and it’s evident in the way that the common areas are open to interaction from both guests and locals. Heckman says, “It’s so fun, as the developer, to go there and see it activated with people. It’s like watching a rendering come to life.”

Visit The Dean Hotel’s website to book a reservation and learn more. Single bunk rooms start at \$79.

Image of coffee bar courtesy of The Dean Hotel, all other photos by Nara Shin

