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Providence's sexy new boutique hotel, The Dean, designed to feel hip, artisty

By JENNA PELLETIER



PROVIDENCE — Check into the new Dean Hotel and you won't find a telephone or a dresser in your room.

"We find that passé," said general manager Anthony Pellegrino of the decision to forgo phones in guest rooms. "Everyone has a cellphone these days." And as for dressers, who unpacks anymore?

But in each of the 52 guest rooms you will find fried-chicken chocolate bars, European antiques and concrete elephant end tables made by local artist Will Reeves.

After a renovation and an almost two-month "soft opening," the century-old building at 122 Fountain St., most recently home to a strip club, officially opens Thursday as a sleek boutique hotel.

The \$7-million project is a collaboration between Providence native Ari Heckman's New York real-estate develop-

ment firm, ASH NYC, and artist-entrepreneur Clay Rockefeller, founder of Providence arts nonprofit The Steel Yard.

Heckman said it was inspired by the trend of "newer concept hotels that are locally authentic," most notably the Ace Hotel, with locations in New York, Portland, Ore., and Los Angeles.

"I thought it was strange that the hotels here tend to be pretty corporate," he said, "because Providence has this reputation of being an artistic, quirky place."

The city's artsy-academic vibe is reflected at every turn. Neon signs with ambiguous phrases such as "Last Chances" and "First Times" hang on each floor; a quote from Marcel Proust's "In Search of Lost Time" is painted in giant letters on the side of the building; and the lobby is filled with international culture magazines. Plus, in keeping with its

past, a copy of Playboy.

But in-room amenities are relatively sparse. Early guests, for instance, did not find tissues in the rooms because planners thought people could blow their noses with toilet paper. Tissues have since been added.

Instead, developers have focused on interior design and creating communal spaces for Rhode Islanders and visitors to interact. The small first floor is packed with interconnected yet defined hangouts, including a lobby lounge with a coffee bar, an Asian-style karaoke lounge, beer hall and cocktail bar.

“You could check in here and just literally stay all night,” Heckman said. “You can do a rotation around the building and never have to leave.”

The food and beverage areas are all managed by local vendors. Bryan Gibb, who started his coffee business as a mobile operation, serves premium brews at the hotel’s Bolt Coffee Co. Ethan Feirstein, who owns downtown bar The Salon, runs the karaoke lounge, The Boombox, and Providence restaurateur Mike Sears oversees the Magdalenae Room cocktail bar. In addition, Sears has teamed up with the owners of wholesale baking business Foremost Baking Co. to operate Faust, a beer hall serving brews, spaetzle and sausages.

The concept of putting such focus on communal spaces in hotels is new to Providence and “very timely right now for the next generation of travelers,” said Martha Sheridan, president and CEO of the Providence Warwick Convention and Visitors Bureau.

“It’s very popular, especially in New York,” she added. “You can’t get a seat in the lobby of the Ace Hotel. People want to come together and exchange ideas, even if they have their cellphones there to hide behind, just in case.”

Heckman said he hopes that aspect of the property will make it a “staycation” destination for locals. And with rates starting at \$79 and bunk beds in several rooms, developers are also marketing it as a place to crash after a night at downtown clubs and bars.

Heckman, who spent a couple years working under Arnold “Buff” Chace at Providence’s Cornish Associates before starting his firm in 2009, said he has always been fascinated by the building’s history. Built by the Episcopal Church as a shelter for the downtrodden, it was also once a brothel and last operated as strip club The Sportsman’s Inn before it was shut down in 2012.

“I knew the building well from growing up here and was always intrigued by how sketchy it was,” he said. “Rather than glossing over that, we’re proud of the transformation.”

Nods to the space’s seedy past come in the form of in-room “intimacy kits,” with condoms, and see-through “peekaboo” showers in some rooms. “While we don’t want anyone offended while they’re staying here, we don’t want to be safe either. And we make it very clear that we’re not for everyone.”

Its intriguing backstory — as well as the reputation Heckman has gained developing mostly residential properties in New York — may be one of the reasons the hotel has already been written up in national and international publications, including The New York Times, Wallpaper and travel magazine AFAR.

While it may seem contradictory, Heckman said, the hotel’s mission is to highlight the best of Providence through its art, food and design, and also introduce locals to new things, from high-end Le Labo candles to private karaoke.

“We want Rhode Islanders to have a hotel where they can bring their cool out-of-town friends and feel proud of it,” he said, “like they’re showing off their place.”

