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Saving Astoria's Commodore Hotel -- and so much more

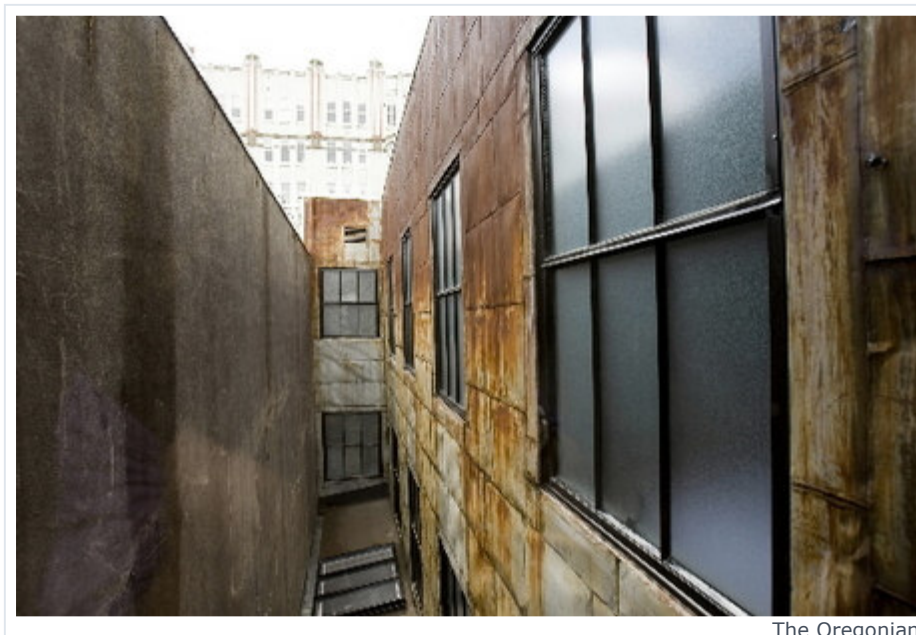
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Katy Muldoon, The Oregonian
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The Oregonian

ASTORIA -- Paint peeled. Plaster crumbled. Decades of dust cloaked windowsills, armoires and unmade beds, as if the Commodore Hotel's last guest had hung a "Do not disturb" sign, and for more than 40 years not a soul did.

At least, that's how it felt in 2007, the first time Paul Caruana and his partners climbed the sturdy wood staircase and snooped through rooms untouched since the downtown Astoria hotel abruptly closed in 1965. They found yellowed photographs, cigarette butts as brittle as toothpicks, telephones from an era when "cellular" was a purely biological term.

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As they sifted through the hotel-turned-time-capsule, Caruana and Brian Faherty of Astoria, and Lance Marrs of Portland, imagined its future. "The building was calling our names," Marrs

says. "It needed to be preserved, and we were the ones to do it."

The three were just launching another project, building the ultra-modern Bside6 office, retail and restaurant space on Portland's lower East Burnside Street. The hotel in Astoria would be its antithesis: historical restoration with edgy, youthful twists. They'd craft an inn steeped in the town's salty past but with iPod-iPhone docking stations on the nightstands and digitized art climbing from the walls to the ceilings.

Astoria was ripe for it.

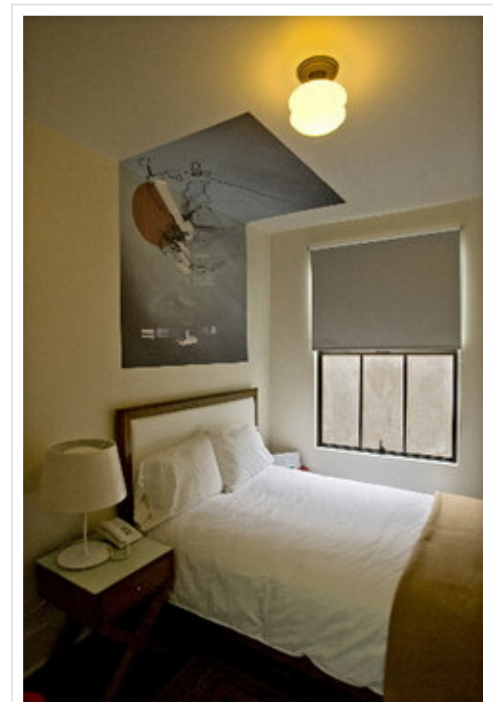
The damp old cannery and timber town -- established in 1811 and the first U.S. settlement west of the Rocky Mountains -- has pushed its history as a selling point at least since the 1980s. In the mid '90s, city leaders created a downtown historic district, providing financial incentives to property owners who'd spruce up antiquated buildings.

When restoration transformed two beauties, the Liberty Theater and the Hotel Elliott, architect John Goodenberger says, investors and lenders snapped to attention, seeing potential where they hadn't before.

Caruana, Faherty and Marrs bought the 1925, three-story Commodore for \$565,000 and spent \$1.5 million restoring it over 18 months. It opened this month, launching with the sort of rockin' party rare to this city of about 10,000.

"I stood pressed against the wall and was agape at how many people were filing through that building," recalls Goodenberger, who is 47 and has spent most of his life in Astoria. "People from Seattle, Portland. I was astounded by how many people I didn't know."

The developers enlisted Jay Raskin of Ecola Architects in Cannon Beach, in part because he'd worked on such restorations as the Hotel Elliott down the street. To start, he



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dug up the Commodore's original plans, drawn by John E. Wicks, who designed many Astoria buildings after a fire devastated downtown in 1922.

"The materials he used and the way he put things together was really well done," Raskin said. "That made things easier."

He worked to preserve what he could and added amenities the original hotel lacked, such as a lobby and an elevator.

Inside the sand-colored, brick veneer structure, guests find a modernist maritime theme.

Andee Hess and her Portland interiors firm, Osmose, designed a lobby lounge that feels like a classic cabin cruiser, with dark wood, sea-blue upholstery and a see-through wall woven from rope. Hess used fishing floats, nautical charts and all sorts of relics unearthed during demolition to fill cubbies in the wall she calls a "vertical collage" above the gas fireplace. She collaborated with Portland's Schoolhouse Electric, a period lighting company started by Faherty, one of the hotel partners, to craft a quirky chandelier that looks like a jellyfish made of red licorice.

While the original hotel had 36 rooms, the new version has 18. Eight suites have private baths; 10 smaller rooms, which the hoteliers call cabins, share baths appointed with such features as marble floors.

Guest rooms, which feel simple and frill-free, sport mirrors saved from the old hotel's decrepit dressers. Along with many of the light fixtures, windows are original, offering views of downtown, hilly neighborhoods and the Columbia River through wavy glass. The hotel's old doors have found new life, too, and room numbers from its previous incarnation appear faint and ghostlike below the new room numbers.

Furnishings skew new: sleek, low-slung gray couches; boxy brick red coffee tables; pure white bedding, including feather-filled comforters to ward off Astoria's chill.

The Commodore feels like the sort of small, efficient, hip hotel you might find in Amsterdam or Reykjavik -- nothing fancy, but filled with interesting stories.

Like Astoria.

The fledgling hoteliers still don't know why the Commodore of old closed so abruptly or why whomever owned it 40-plus years ago walked away, shuttering it like a summer house closed up for winter. Until the mid 1960s, though, 14th Street was a key gateway into downtown. Ferries tied up at



The Oregonian
Paul Caruna and Brian Faherty

the street's end, and disembarking travelers could choose from the Commodore, the Hotel Astoria, the Norblad -- all within a few blocks.

But when the Astoria-Megler Bridge, dedicated in 1966, rerouted traffic and made ferry travel passe, businesses along 14th Street foundered.

Starting with the Commodore, two of the hotel's partners plan to help turn the city's economic tide.

Caruana, who is 38 and owns a construction company, and Faherty, 45, who works in real estate and manufacturing, moved their families to Astoria a couple of years ago. Together, along with other buildings along 14th Street, they've bought the Astoria and Norblad hotels. Piece by piece, they're renovating them, hoping to lure shops, restaurants and bars, creating the sort of high-energy district that might entice so-called young creatives from Portland, Seattle and elsewhere to visit and, perhaps, to stay.

As they readied the Commodore for its debut, the partners enlisted WK12, Wieden + Kennedy's experimental advertising school and mini-agency to craft the new-school identity and branding they were after. They're marketing via blogs, Twitter and Facebook. Plus, they've sent curiosity-inducing letters from a mysterious entity who calls himself, herself or itself The Commodore to travel, home, design and other special-interest magazines.

The hotel's Web site piques interest, too. Click on commodoreastoria.com and you might feel as if that road trip you were planning unfurls before your eyes ... and you might be breaking the speed limit.

Whether the youth-oriented strategy will work in Astoria or will pay off for the Commodore as the economy languishes remains to be seen. But Faherty said the hotel already has booked weddings and other group gatherings, and it sold out over Memorial Day weekend.

Caruana is more focused on the possibility of a long-term payoff, he said, rather than a quick profit -- for the hotel and for Astoria.

"When you develop in Portland," he said, "people notice. But when you develop here, it changes the place."

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shaniko

May 29, 2009 at 10:12PM

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the room photo at the top'o the page has that 1950's Rocky Butte ambience going for it...proably stinks like long dead winos upstairs there...the toilet is the last door on the left at the end of the hall....no thanks-not for what you're charging

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morgan

July 29, 2010 at 11:25AM

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With the history it has Astoria could revive as the new-old hotel in the city. If I was an investor I would put my money to recondition a retro style hotel just like in the good old time, I am sure there are people that appreciate this kind of buildings on their real value.

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