

Historic hotel to unveil \$5 million restoration and new brand

By Erin Mulvaney | March 18, 2016 Updated: March 21, 2016 9:40am



The midcentury hotel on the southwest side of downtown Houston billed itself as one of the first four-star hotels in Texas when it opened more than five decades ago, with white marble floors, a floating staircase in the lobby and other design details by a renowned Los Angeles architect.

It opened in 1963 and drew high-profile guests such as Bob Dylan, Led Zeppelin band members, and Sonny and Cher. It shuttered in 1989 amid the oil bust and sat vacant before it was purchased by Sotherly Hotels in 1999.

The hotel at 1700 Smith, currently the Crowne Plaza Houston Downtown, will now return to its historic brand The Whitehall next month and show off a \$5 million renovation, the first extensive revamp since a \$25 million improvement made when the property was purchased.

This renovation comes as the hotel market in downtown Houston is rapidly changing, with new products launching and existing hotels making investments to keep up. Developers and hoteliers are revving up for Houston's major events, including the NCAA Final Four and the Super Bowl in 2017.

Two high-end properties, the Marriott Marquis and the Hotel Alessandra, are under construction nearby. The Four Seasons also announced a major renovation. A JW Marriott and a Holiday Inn also opened recently in historic spaces.

"We decided now was a great time to bring the hotel back to its glory days," said Tanya Taylor with Sotherly Hotels. "The market was really yearning for a new hotel product."

The hotel boom took off when the price of oil was high and Houston had a shortage of hotels. A recent analysis by CBRE Hotels, previously PFK Consulting, showed that downtown had 74 percent occupancy in 2014, nearly 10 percentage points higher than the average. The downtown market now has 69.5 percent occupancy, and it's expected to drop more.

About 15 years ago, the downtown market only had 1,800 hotel rooms in eight properties. Now, there are 18 hotels and six more under construction for a total of nearly 8,000 rooms, Central Houston president Bob Eury said.

"For the Whitehall, it looks like a very exciting change to that property. It makes it more contemporary," Eury said. "That has to happen with an older property to stay competitive with a lot of new properties coming online."

While the oil industry's struggles have hurt business travelers, he said Houston has been working to increase the number of leisure travelers, who could help keep these hotels full.

The recent renovations to the 259-room hotel, including a face-lift to the exterior, new lighting and additional landscaping, are the first of this magnitude since Sotherly took ownership, Taylor said.

Guest rooms were updated with hardwood floors. Heavy curtains were removed, and the bedding was updated. Amenities were added, including showers with glass doors. The pool areas was updated and the lobby was restored.

The hotel will be rebranded as The Whitehall on April 14. At the same time, the hotel's restaurant, Brazos, will open as Edgar's Hermano, with executive chef Sylvia Covarrubias at the helm. A new restaurant, Part and Parcel, will also open.

Taylor said the company decided to end the contract with Crowne Plaza. Sotherly wanted to launch its own brand and have it reflect the boutique hotel.

"In Houston, we have such a hard time of holding on to our history," she said. "This brings a unique experience in preserving the history of downtown. ... It would have been easy to scrape everything and start fresh. Instead we wanted to make it part of the story of the Houston landscape."

The hotel was designed by Los Angeles architecture firm Welton Becket and Associates, the renowned firm responsible for the Beverly Hilton, Walt Disney World's Contemporary Resort, the Capitol Records Building and Reunion Tower in Dallas.

Many of the touches from the firm's work remain in the hotel today, including the iconic staircase connecting the first and second floors, wood accents and the Italian white marble tile in the lobby.

The drop in oil prices and shrinking job growth have led to occupancy declines at hotels, particularly among business travelers, Taylor said.

She said the owners still hope that the trend is short-term and that Houston will bounce back.

"Obviously we have to be competitive in the market," she said. "We have something which I think will attract guests looking for a unique experience, not something cookie-cutter."

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