

HOSPITALITY Distinct Dwellings

Grupo Habita's second and third properties in the United States bring two unique personalities to Chicago's Wicker Park and Bucktown neighborhoods.

By Mikki Brammer

The Robey

This page and opposite: The unique triangular footprint of the Robey's building forced interior architects Nicolas Schuybroek and Marc Merckx to think creatively when designing its spaces, which also include a café, a lounge, and a rooftop bar.

The urban grit of Chicago is a stark contrast to the bucolic peace of the 8,000-acre citrus farm in Veracruz, Mexico, where hotelier Carlos Couturier spends much of his time. And yet there was something about the midwestern city that he found captivating. "Chicago is a unique city—probably the most American of them all," he says. "It kind of lives inward and has a life of its own. It's casual, practical, and humble."

That was enough to convince him that a certain block straddling the city's Wicker Park and Bucktown neighborhoods was the perfect location for the second and third U.S.-based properties of his hotel brand Grupo Habita. (Its stable includes 12 hotels in Mexico—including the beloved Condesa DF in Mexico City—as well as New York's HotelAmericano.)

At first Couturier and his partners had planned for only one boutique hotel, the Robey, in a fine Art Deco building known formerly as the Northwest Tower. But an opportunity to also convert the nearby historic Hollander Fireproof Warehouse set his imagination ticking, resulting in a second

property, the Hollander, which opened together with the Robey last year.

The 12-story building that now houses the Robey was designed in 1929 by Perkins, Chatten & Hammond and began life as offices. In the 1980s it was nicknamed the "Coyote building" for the way its massing rises into a cupola, like a coyote howling at the moon. Among the structure's many charms is its flatiron form, which allows for unusually generous streams of natural light into each of the 69 hotel rooms.

Couturier appointed Belgian interior architects Nicolas Schuybroek and Marc Merckx to design the hotel. Known for envisioning his establishments from a cinematic perspective, he requested that their concept somehow embody the aesthetic of an Edward Hopper painting.

"Light and atmosphere are really something that Hopper caught very well in his paintings," says Merckx. The artist's influence manifests throughout the Robey in deep, rich colors—reds, greens, wood tones—offset by moody geometric shadows carved into ebullient blocks of sunlight. ▶



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The Robey

Left: Generous windows flood the Robey's guest rooms with sunlight as well as spectacular views of the Chicago skyline. "The way light enters the building is different at every single moment of the day," says Schuybroek. Below: A rich palette of greens and reds is evocative of Edward Hopper paintings, which served as inspiration for the hotel's design.

"Carlos wanted to make sure that we didn't pursue an agenda of overdesigning things," adds Schuybroek. "So we tried to work with a very restrained material palette that would fit with the building's context while reinterpreting the American mid-century vibe with a European twist."

In particular, the designers referenced

European architecture from the 1920s and '30s—such as metal detailing inspired by Pierre Chareau's *Maison de Verre*. It was also important to Couturier that, while still elegant, the hotel evoke the grit that the neighborhoods are known for. "The whole thing was an exercise in balance," Merckx says. Materials like painted

steel and terrazzo found in the building's old entrance hall sit alongside custom-designed furniture and pieces sourced from flea markets and vintage design shops—including works by Milo Baughman, Paul McCobb, Harvey Propper, and Edward Wormley. "We also wanted to find pieces that were typical of Illinois or Michigan," says Schuybroek. "They had these fantastic millworkers and wood shops in the forties and fifties, and the idea was to find pieces from that period."

Dark hardwood floors in the guest rooms elicit a rustic coziness to counter the famous Chicago winter chill. The building's triangular footprint, and thus lack of wall space, presented an interesting spatial conundrum, so in most rooms a wire-glass bathroom partition evocative of more bureaucratic spaces doubles as the bed's headboard. Though it's a reference to the Robey's past life as an office building, it's also a clever means of diffusing natural light into the bathroom while retaining privacy. In front of the glass partition on each side of the custom Amish-made bed, floor-to-ceiling metal poles—reminiscent of those that passengers >



cling to on the nearby L train—hold suspended marble-and-wood bedside tables.

Whereas certain aspects of the Robey lend themselves to Hopper-esque moments of introspection, the Hollander is firmly centered on social interaction. The two buildings stand side by side but they are distinct entities both in design and spirit.

The latter is billed as a “social stay” establishment—a coy reframing of the “hostel” concept. Eight of the Hollander’s 20 rooms are shared, meaning guests can book one of the six individual beds, and are equipped with personal lockers. There is one saving grace: Social-stay rooms have their own bathrooms, sparing guests from towel-clad sprints down the halls to communal washrooms.

French architecture studio Delordinaire took on the design for the Hollander. Partner Adrian Hunfalvy, whose previous projects include spaces for Aesop, Isabel Marant, and Yves Saint Laurent, says the idea of hostels being grungy, bedbug-infested backpacker hubs is outdated. “Now there’s a group of people, somewhere around 25 to 40 years old, who still can’t pay the prices of the Robey, but they’re very design conscious.”



In the guest rooms, custom birch plywood beds, black steel, and polished concrete floors coexist in elegant harmony. “We weren’t looking for anything flashy or overly luxurious, but everything was chosen in a way that fits together well,” says Hunfalvy. “There’s an intelligence in the way the simple materials are put together.”

Guests are encouraged to connect

with one another via Instagram before and during their stays. Needless to say, the dwelling’s public spaces—the expansive lobby and open-plan coffee shop—are especially conducive to mingling, not only with other visitors but with the locals. “The essence of Wicker Park lies in its community,” says Couturier. “They’re all forward-thinking people in love with their neighborhood.” ■

The Hollander

Above: The Hollander occupies what was once a furniture storage facility built in 1905. French architecture firm Delordinaire retained several of its utilitarian industrial features, including the exposed ductwork and concrete pillars. Right: One of the shared social-stay bunk rooms. The hotel also has a laundry space and a soon-to-open bike rental and repair shop.

