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Over the Top: New Life for Forgotten Hotel Spaces

From old storerooms to former horse stables, the travel industry is transforming underused spaces into suites, sushi bars, pie shops, and more.

By Dana Rebmann JUL 18, 2022



SHONDALAND STAFF

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With demand for must-stay experiences skyrocketing in the travel industry, hotel properties large and small are rethinking how to achieve maximum potential of their square footage. Creating spaces with star power has gone beyond merely giving the lobby a face-lift or the rooms a refresh. Reconceptualizing a hotel's architectural purpose requires recognizing the outside-the-box potential in nooks and crannies not typically considered valuable hotel real estate.

"As hoteliers, we have to be innovators, and to innovate means looking at what you have and making it relevant," says [Fairmont Miramar Hotel & Bungalows](#) general manager Sam Jagger. A year ago, the primary function of a storeroom off the Santa Monica, California, property's lobby was to hold tequila. Today, it's been rechristened as the eight-seat sushi bar Soko. Scoring a spot in the intimate, glass-fronted restaurant provides a front-row seat for the culinary artistry of chef Masa Shimakawa.



The space sushi bar Soko now occupies was formerly a tequila storeroom.
COURTESY FAIRMONT MIRAMAR HOTEL & BUNGALOWS

Look closely. It's a trend happening at hotels around the world. A two-story rice barn at the [Na Nirand](#) resort in Chiang Mai, Thailand, was converted into an event space and pool bar. At [Palihouse Santa Barbara](#), the general manager's itty-bitty office was turned into a swanky, guests-only honor bar. The bright and inviting pool lounge at [The Isla](#) in Batemans Bay, Australia, used to be a garage. A bellman's closet at [The Ritz-Carlton, San Francisco](#), now serves as French vintner Jean-Charles Boisset's JCB Tasting Lounge. When it comes to hotel redesigns, there are no more boundaries.

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"We design to every space that inspires us," says Boisset, "and in our little jewel box at The Ritz-Carlton, San Francisco, we still created opulence and additional intimacy through the richness of the velvet and the textures of the fabrics."

Hotels rethinking how to best utilize their floor plans is a trend that continues to evolve. With post-pandemic travel on the rise and the home-rental market continuing to take a bite out of hotel stays, competition is fierce for travelers (and their positive social media influence). While visitors may be perfectly content to check into a pool-view room on the third floor, they're absolutely elated when handed keys to something like Dolly Parton's retired tour bus.



Dolly Suite 1986 is outfitted with Dolly Parton's retired wigs and gowns.
COURTESY DOLLYWOOD

A 45-foot-long Prevost coach that Parton traveled 360,000 miles in from 2008 to 2022 is now permanently parked behind the DreamMore Resort and Spa at the Dollywood theme park in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Now, visitors can spend the night in the bedazzled suite stocked with the music legend's retired gowns, shoes, and wigs.

"We wanted to keep it as authentic as possible," says Dollywood Parks & Resorts hospitality marketing director Brian Angello of creating the exclusive Dolly Suite 1986 experience. "The idea is to imagine that she walked off the bus just before you got on." In typical Dolly fashion, a portion of the proceeds generated from stays is donated to her nonprofit organization, the Dollywood Foundation.

In many instances, hotels are now fully embracing their architectural quirks as amenities that are hopefully worthy of five-star reviews. The approach is also sustainable because reusing building materials helps cut down on environmental impact. For example, in what was once the Helsinki county jail, most of the rooms at Hotel Katajanokka are the combination of two or three cells. A former isolation cell was left as is and hosts romantic dinners.

Cliveden House, located west of London, has hosted every British monarch since George I. (It's also where Meghan Markle spent the night before her wedding to Prince Harry.) When the decision was made to convert the Duke of Westminster's former horse stables into the Astor Grill restaurant, many of the original equine features were preserved in the design.

"The booth seating is actually fitted into the individual horse stables, the floor tiles and wall tiles are also original, and the feeding troughs for the horses are boxed into display shelving behind each dining booth," explains general manager Francisco Macedo.

A similar homage to a building's previous life is lavishly on display at Teller's restaurant inside Oklahoma City's [The National](#) hotel, located inside the former First National Bank. The brasserie-style eatery's booths are set among the original teller windows. The host stand is a former check-signing desk. And a speakeasy-style bar is located in — where else? — a vault in the building's basement.



Former bank teller windows now serve as partitions at The National.
COURTESY THE NATIONAL

Originally built as a bank in 1924, [The O'Neil](#) hotel in Kinston, North Carolina, also makes creative use of its former vaults: A 16-ton stronghold off the lobby is now stocked with complimentary refreshments for guests, while a smaller second vault serves as a family-friendly guest room with a set of bunk beds.

Enter the vault in Berlin's [Hotel de Rome](#), formerly the Dresdner Bank headquarters, and you can have a spa treatment or take a dip in the pool. "The interplay of color with the golden Bisazza mosaic gives visitors the impression they are almost swimming in gold," says Rocco Forte Hotels deputy chairman and director of design Olga Polizzi.

One recently opened property in Oceanside, California, reimagined (and relocated) an entire building. Remember the dreamy bungalow from the original *Top Gun* that Kelly McGillis' character Charlie called home and Tom Cruise's Maverick cruised over to for a dinner date? After being moved one block and undergoing three years of restoration, the 19th-century Queen Anne cottage now resides in the courtyard of the [Mission Pacific](#) hotel with a replica of Maverick's Kawasaki Ninja ZX900 motorcycle parked out front.



High Pie serves hand pastries in the courtyard of the Mission Pacific hotel.
COURTESY HIGH PIE

Inside the house, sweet shop High Pie offers a menu of fruit-filled hand pastries served alongside a plethora of *Top Gun* memorabilia including movie posters and behind-the-scenes photographs snapped in 1985 during the blockbuster's filming. It's a nostalgic walk down memory lane fueled by a sugar rush you can't find anywhere else.

"When I was initially approached with this crazy opportunity to create a culinary experience at the *Top Gun* house, the first thing that came to mind was pie," says chef and restaurateur Tara Lazar. "There's nothing more American than pie — and now you can eat it at the *Top Gun* house."

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