

hospitality design

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hidden treasures

HDexpo
a hospitality design event

By Stacy Shoemaker Rauven

Photography courtesy of RLHC



1. A rendering of the upcoming Hotel RL Spokane's lobby—with its version of the brand's signature seating concept, the Steps, and a climbing wall.

RULE BENDERS

Industry veterans rethink the 3-Star hotel



Greg Mount and Bill Linehan—two hotel veterans who worked together launching multiple brands at Starwood Hotels & Resorts and then most recently at management company Richfield Hospitality—hatched the idea for Red Lion Hotel Corporation's (RLHC) new Hotel RL brand during a car ride conversation before they even joined the company. On their way to see a hotel in Atlanta, they were discussing the possibilities at RLHC. "We recognized that lifestyle brands tend to exist in upper-upscale and luxury categories as new-builds, and there was an opportunity in the 3-Star conversion space, something that was more relevant with today's lifestyle generation shift—a high touch, authentic, coffeehouse type of feel," says Linehan, now executive vice president and chief marketing officer for RLHC. "There wasn't a good 3-Star

independent boutique-feeling alternative," adds Mount, RLHC's president and CEO. "Red Lion was a great Pacific Northwest regional player, which had 40 years of heritage—it's where people took vacations or had their proms—with a lot of goodwill around it, but it had become irrelevant." Mount and Linehan saw the chance to take the strong elements of its independent, Pacific Northwest-rooted ethos and "create a more aspirational choice for 3-Star customers and owners," Mount explains.

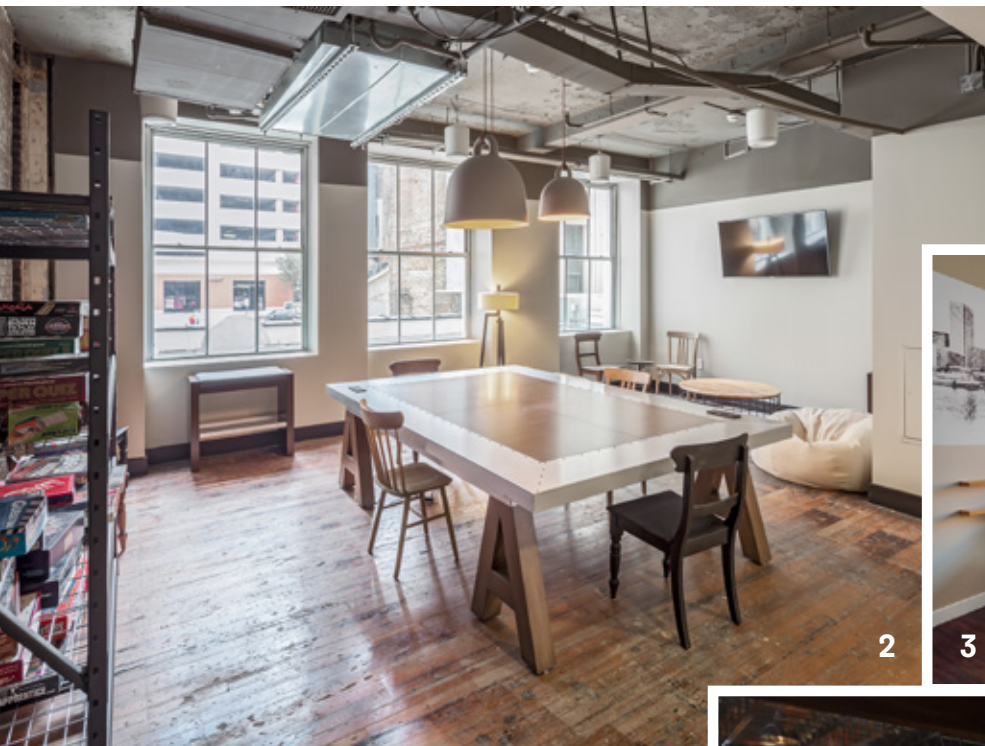
That was in late 2013. Linehan and Mount both joined RLHC in early 2014, and Hotel RL was launched less than a year later. The first locations have recently opened in Baltimore and Washington, DC (in August and November, respectively), with more planned for 2016 in Spokane, Washington (the company's headquarters); St. Louis; Salt Lake City; Olympia, Washington; and for 2017, in College Station, Texas (the brand's first new build).

During the creation process, the duo put effort into rethinking industry standards—the check-in desk, lobby layout, and the guestroom desk, to name a few. "The notion of hotel service

has gotten totally warped," says Linehan. "As an industry, we have become un-hospitable. Why walk in a lobby and stand on a carpet and wait until someone summons you over? The service should be coming to you. Why does there have to be a specific area for everything in the lobby?"

To answer these questions in terms of design, they called in the Gettys Group, specifically the firm's newly formed division PULSE, which focuses on lifestyle brand design. "They encouraged us to ask the question, 'Why not?' So that's what we did," explains Jackson Thilenius, senior design director for PULSE by Gettys. "We approached most of the design with the idea that both business and [leisure] travelers are explorers and need a basecamp from which to launch their next adventure."

Take the guestroom, for instance. Closets have been replaced with a gear drop (with retail-style slate walls and movable hanging attachments); adjustable tables act as both a coffee table and work station; and headboards and integrated side tables are power ready. "There's complete flexibility in the design to allow people to play and work as they choose,"



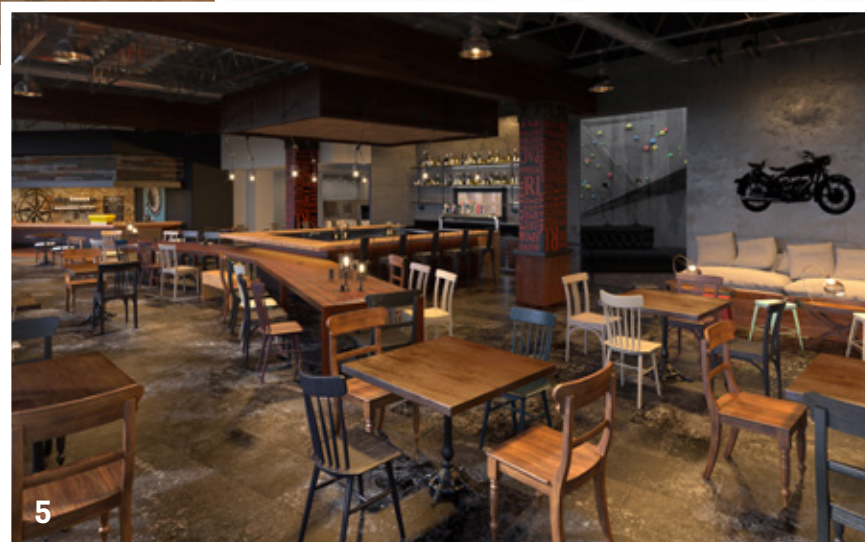
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2+3. A workspace in Hotel RL Baltimore Inner Harbor sports an industrial vibe, while a graphic wallcovering above the bed in a guestroom reflects the hotel's waterfront location.

4. In the lobby of the Hotel RL Baltimore, the Steps offer a perfect perch to listen to acts and TED-like talks on the Living Stage.

5. A rendering of the casual dining room and bar at Hotel RL Spokane, marked by a mix of wood tables and chairs.

Thilenius says. "In many ways it affords guests the opportunity to reinvent themselves and rethink how they approach hotel stays."

Mount and Linehan had activated lobbies when repositioning brands for Starwood, and they wanted to do that here as well, just for the Millennial mindset. "Hotels used to be the centerpiece of the community, and the hotel's centerpiece is the lobby, so we looked at how we could bring more synergies into the lobbies," says Linehan. Void of check-in desks or staff members in typical uniforms, expect a coffeehouse vibe ("we wanted a warm environment," he adds) complete with curated local art and various

seating options including an area called the Steps, the brand's signature bleacher-like section that encourages socializing. Across from the Steps is the Living Stage, a place for live entertainment and TED-style talks, including "speakers from the community or regional area—a professor or the next activist," says Mount. "It's an environment that challenges our guests and allows them to experience the location they are in—going back to when hotels were the town hall." A fulltime curator for the brand is responsible for exploring each marketplace to find the right people (and vetting the already many requests to grace the stage),

and the talks will be broadcast live in other RL locations, and housed on RLHC's website.

For a further sense of place, location-specific touches prevail in each property. In Spokane, for example, the lobby will feature a climbing wall, and instead of white stripes separating the spaces in the parking lot, dandelions (prevalent in Washington state) will do the job. "The adventurous spirit of the Pacific Northwest played a large role in the idea of connecting with the local," explains Thilenius. "We want guests to feel as though they are infused into the culture of the community, while still feeling like they are at a destination unlike the everyday." **hd**