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A modern spin

21c, a hotel and a museum, will fill downtown 1800s buildings

By **Wayne Tompkins**
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The Courier-Journal

Their combination hotel and museum celebrates the leading edge of 21st-century life, and marrying that concept to a group of buildings on West Main Street dating to the 19th century has been a challenge.

But husband-and-wife co-developers Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown have their 21c hotel/museum on track for opening as soon as next month.



Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown have their 21c hotel/museum on track for opening as soon as next month. (By Sam Upshaw Jr., The Courier-Journal)

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The hotel's restaurant, Proof on Main, is scheduled to open Feb. 7. The hotel itself is expected to follow soon after, well ahead of an April 9 preview dinner, Wilson said.

When the hotel opens, guests will find optional sidewalk check-ins, world-class contemporary art, free wireless Internet, flat-screen televisions and mint julep cups in every room.

ROOM RATES

21c
\$150-\$175 (anticipated)

Seelbach
\$130-\$160

Galt House
\$135

Marriott Louisville Downtown
\$160

Seelbach, Galt House and Marriott are weekend rates.

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"We hope it will become a weekend destination," Wilson said, noting its walking distance from several downtown attractions.

He said research has shown that people are taking more frequent, but shorter, vacations in the region.

"We hope to develop packages with the Kentucky Center and Actors Theatre and the museums where people can come to Louisville for a weekend and stay here and walk everywhere," Wilson said.

Rooms will rent for \$150 to \$175 a night.

The \$26 million, 90-room hotel and contemporary art museum is what Wilson calls the "missing link" of the West Main renaissance, which along with the Kentucky Center features the Louisville Slugger Museum, the Louisville Science Center, the Frazier Arms Museum and nearby Muhammad Ali Center.

It's a redevelopment puzzle piece that city officials are awaiting eagerly.

"It enhances the overall cosmopolitan feel of our downtown," Metro Mayor Jerry Abramson said.

He said the boutique hotel will complement other downtown hotels such as the recently upgraded Galt House, the new Residence Inn and Marriott hotels, and mainstays like the Seelbach and the Brown.

In addition to \$1.7 million from the city of Louisville and \$3 million from the Kentucky Tourism Development Finance Authority, the project received \$2.5 million through the federal New Markets tax credit program.

The buildings at 700 to 706 W. Main St. and 112 S. Seventh St. date from the late 1800s and are on the National Register of Historic Places, which qualified them for additional federal tax credits.

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The name 21c refers to the 21st Century, however, and reconciling the new with the old proved at times a daunting task, Wilson said.

While the building's exteriors are being restored, as a condition for the tax credit much of the interior had to be retained as well, Wilson said. Meanwhile, another hotel regulation requires a window in every room.

"We created an atrium that would allow light through the core, and that was difficult in pleasing the tax credit people as well as meeting our requirements," Wilson said. "They didn't want us to do very much with that area. In fact, we had to revise our plans three different times."

A completely open atrium was originally planned, "but because we were putting together these four 25-foot-wide buildings, they wanted us to retain the integrity of the original structure," including the beams.

A compromise was reached allowing Wilson and Brown to take out most of the beams.

"But we were able to have the skylight where we needed it," he said.

Wilson and Brown operate Kentucky Bison Co. in Oldham County. Brown is great-granddaughter of Brown-Forman founder George Garvin Brown.

"Laura Lee and I wanted to participate in the restoration of downtown in some way, so we looked at opportunities, coupled with our love for art," Wilson said. "We call it a museum/ hotel, because we're not just using art to decorate; it's truly a museum. It will be free to the public."

The 5,000-square-foot museum will be in the lobby of the hotel on the street level.

Wilson, a farmer by trade, said his limited knowledge of the hotel industry is the reason he brought in what he considers some of the top names in the business.

Sage Hospitality of Denver will be the managing and marketing partner.

Myriad Restaurant Group will operate Proof, under the direction of executive chef Michael Paley. Myriad's roster includes New York City's Tribeca Grill and Nobu restaurants.

Proof's cuisine will be "American, with an Italian flair," with a menu that changes frequently, Wilson said.

New York architect Deborah Berke "is well-known for her sleek, kind of minimalist style," Wilson said.

"The walls had to be raw brick, because they were warehouses. That's the way (preservationists) wanted them left," he said. "So that didn't lend itself to French or gilded mirrors or whatever. She has a lot of experience with putting contemporary inside of an old building."

The hotel is expected to employ about 200 people.

Among the eclectic things guests will find are headboards made from reclaimed plastic soft drink bottles.

"It's been transformed into sort of a pebbly surface. It looks sort of like cork," Wilson said.

Another of 21c's quirks is that the museum will feature only living artists.

"That goes along with the 21st-century concept," Wilson said.

"We like young, emerging artists, and local artists. It allows you to see that the quality of local artists are just as good as New York or wherever."

Reporter Wayne Tompkins can be reached at (502) 582-4232.

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