

# The New York Times

## Boutique Hotel Style Aplenty in Smaller U.S. Cities



There's a downtown vibe to the newest 21c Museum Hotel. Contemporary artworks fill the public gallery spaces in a former factory building. The restaurant features an open kitchen, white subway tiles and stout concrete pillars. Guest rooms above look like lofts with platform beds and floor-to-ceiling drapes to draw across expansive steel-framed windows. A trendy boutique hotel in New York or Los Angeles, perhaps? Try [Oklahoma City](#), where the rates start at the comparatively modest \$219 a night.

Like similar small but growing hotel brands, 21c has taken the lifestyle hotel more common in big cities to secondary-in-size locations, offering smart design, destination restaurants and local programming where few comparable options existed. And the choice of location for these boutiques, in cities like Lexington, Ky., and Madison, Wis., and sometimes in seasonal resort areas, makes for attractively priced weekends, especially for travelers used to paying big-city prices.

One of the earliest of its ilk, [Ace Hotel](#) ([acehotel.com](#)) opened in 1999 in Seattle, and has since progressed to both large cities, including London and New York, and smaller ones, such as Pittsburgh. The new [Ace New Orleans](#) opened in March in a former furniture store in the Warehouse District with retro design from the firm of Roman and Williams, a music venue, a New Orleans-accented Italian restaurant, a rooftop pool and rooms from \$189.

In some ways, the spread of design hotels reflects a maturing market. "Hotels are slow to adapt because of the amount of capital required to produce a hotel," said Ben Weprin, the chief executive and founder of Graduate Hotels, which are in college towns. "With a restaurant, you need hope and a dream and a credit card. In hospitality it's a significant capital investment, so it's a much slower process, especially in tertiary or secondary cities."

Steve Wilson, a founder of 21c Museum Hotels, said: "There are a lot of cities in the country without a great hotel and they happen to be in secondary cities. It's sort of an untapped segment of the industry."

Here are three small hotel companies tapping it.

### 21c Museum Hotels

Major contemporary art collectors, Mr. Wilson and his wife, Laura Lee Brown, opened their first 21c Museum Hotel in [Louisville, Ky.](#), 10 years ago to help revitalize downtown and create a cultural center in the community through their art holdings, now found throughout each of six hotels.

"We are about revitalizing city centers," said Mr. Wilson, who had no prior experience in hotels when he started. "We thought if we were able to be successful in downtown and make the city center more interesting to live and work in, we'd be preventing sprawl."

Most of the [21c hotels](#) ([21cmuseumhotels.com](#)) occupy repurposed buildings, such as an automobile factory in Oklahoma City, which opened in June, and a former bank building in Lexington, which debuted this year. Each hotel (there are also locations in Cincinnati; Durham, N.C.; and Bentonville, Ark.) employs a curator, and the museum at each is free and often holds events like docent tours and yoga in the galleries. Restaurants tend to have independent identities from the hotels and draw a large share of local patrons.

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"We get a lot of people who don't think of themselves as interested in art and wouldn't go to museum for a special trip but realize with us that it can be funny, sexy, a little uncomfortable and it brings people back," he said.

The company plans to open hotels next in Nashville, Kansas City and Indianapolis, though Mr. Wilson added that he has looked at property in Brooklyn, Miami and Los Angeles and expects to move into a major city soon.

### Graduate Hotels

Most college towns are the domain of undistinguished chain hotels, which the new [Graduate Hotels](#) ([graduatehotels.com](#)) aims to change. Graduates impart a sense of place through design and food in six locations including Tempe, Ariz.; Charlottesville, Va.; Athens, Ga.; and Madison, Wis.

"People want to come to these towns and live like a local," said Mr. Weprin, Graduate's chief executive. "They want a hotel that captures the moment." Graduates do that with eclectic design, including flea market art at the [Graduate Tempe](#), wooden canoes affixed to the lobby ceiling at the [Graduate Madison](#), and a mix of antiques and modern furnishings at the [Graduate Charlottesville](#).

They also focus on communal spaces and local food and beverage options. The new [Graduate Ann Arbor](#) in Michigan features a 40-foot communal table in the lobby where coffee from Zingerman's Deli, a local institution, is served (rooms from \$209). The [Graduate Oxford](#) in Oxford, Miss., has a Southern restaurant in a barn-wood-paneled room modeled on an old general store. And the [Graduate Athens](#) features live bands at its restaurant to reflect the local music scene.

Started in 2014, the company serves university visitors; alumni, especially on football weekends; local business communities; and at least one surprising group: wedding parties. "We had no idea," said Mr. Weprin. "We get a lot of destination weddings in these places that have an emotional connection to the bride and groom."

In this and next year, Graduate Hotels are coming to Berkeley, Calif.; Richmond, Va.; Durham, N.C.; and Lincoln, Neb.

### Lark Hotels

[Lark Hotels](#) ([larkhotels.com](#)) stakes out its territory largely in New England resort destinations and small towns. Since opening four years ago, it has grown to 18 locations, including the new [Summerville](#) that revitalized a historic hotel on Martha's Vineyard (rooms from \$149) and [Field Guide](#), which replaced an English-style inn in Stowe, Vt., with more rustic, woody design.

"The motivation was basically to bring a new, fresh, modern take on what has been happening in New England forever, which is hospitality," said Rob Blood, the chief executive of Lark Hotels. "We didn't see a space in the upper part of the market with updated fresh design and unpretentious service."

All of the properties have a relaxed feel and whimsical design elements that reflect their location, such as mounted deer heads made of cardboard and wallpaper with bird patterns at [Field Guide](#). The just-opened [Blue](#) on Plum Island, Mass., has 10 mostly white rooms with ocean blue accents and rugs the color of sand. Playful amenities at [Summerville](#) include a game room with Ping-Pong and Twister.

Service is casual and friendly, and the staff will never call you "Sir" or "Ma'am."

"I think the psychology of travelers is changing," Mr. Blood said. "We talk about millennials as a demographic but I think of it as a psychographic. People are looking for a stronger connection with the stay experience."