

Inspired By Indiana Jones, Graduate Hotels Remakes A Berkeley Landmark



Graduate Hotels

The lobby at Graduate Hotels new Berkeley location features a globe-themed chandelier and a wall of thousands of National Geographics. [-]

Ben Weprin is the ebullient 38-year-old hotelier behind [Graduate Hotels](#), a Chicago-based collection of boutique properties in college towns across the country. I spoke to him this week about his latest opening--an ambitious renovation of Berkeley's iconic 1928 Hotel Durant, opening May 1, near the campus of U.C. Berkeley--and the future of the eclectic hotel brand he's helming.



Graduate Hotels

Graduate Hotels CEO Ben Weprin

The former Hotel Durant is an old charmer with lots of famous quirks [The rooms feature bong lamps and the bar still has bullet holes from a 1990 hostage situation]. What's new as it opens as a Graduate Hotel?

Graduate Hotels are all about uncovering and unlocking local traditions and heritage and distilling that throughout the design. I had never been to Berkeley before I started this. I was completely captivated by the feeling of the town. Every restaurant is different. Businesses are run by local operators. It's the home of Alice Waters. I love Berkeley. Hotel Durant has a great history. Henry's bar had been a game-day watering hole for ages. We didn't want it to lose the smokey old bar feel. But we also wanted to update the place. Los Angeles restaurateur Bill Chait, who graduated from Cal, and Carl Shuster are doing the food and beverage, and Tartine bakery will be opening a cafe on Durant Avenue. But I think we get most of our inspiration from Harrison Ford.



Graduate Hotel in Berkeley

Harrison Ford?

Yes, as in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. That was really our whole design inspiration. What would his *pied a terre* look like? What if he threw you the keys and said, "Have fun in Berkeley?" It wouldn't be one design aesthetic. It would be fascinating bits and pieces. Lived-in and warm. Worldly and global. We have a massive globe chandelier. Colorful murals by local artist Chris Lux. We also pay tribute to the university in ways that aren't too obvious. We have a wall of 8,500 National Geographic magazines. Not only does that match the worldly design tone but it's the same Pantone as Cal's university colors. We don't just throw up a pennant.

Berkeley is Graduate's seventh location. Since 2014, you've opened alongside universities in Ann Arbor, Madison, Oxford, Charlottesville, Tempe and Athens, Georgia. Each hotel is unique but what are some of your favorite signature details so far?

Again, you won't see the obvious. If you go to Madison, you might expect to see a badger and a red and white color tone. Instead, we have lots of plaid and canoes mounted on the ceiling over the lobby. In Lincoln, Nebraska, we did a version of the Beverly Hills Hotel banana leaf wallpaper but with corn. We like playing with high and low. Richmond, Virginia -- opening this summer -- has some really awesome references to Arthur Ashe, who's a local hero there. We designed a tennis court into the floor of the lobby.



A guest room at the new Graduate Hotels Berkeley

What's your most exciting project in the works?

We're building a new 195-room hotel on Roosevelt Island in New York City at Cornell Tech. It's part of the first stage of a new campus and we'll be the only hotel on Roosevelt. It's just opposite Manhattan, so you can imagine the views. That opens in 2019. This year, we're opening Lincoln, Richmond and Bloomington with Minneapolis and Seattle slated to open in 2018. Seattle in particular should be incredible. It's one of the most amazing cities and we're thrilled to be developing a location there as well.

Aside from your own places, what are your favorite hotels in the world?

Oh, that's so tough. For me, it's places that aren't trying too hard to be interesting. They just are. I love [Isle de France](#) in St-Barth. [Chateau Marmont](#) in Los Angeles. I love the [Greenwich Hotel](#) in New York. [Blackberry Farm](#) in Tennessee. It's the people, not the product. Like I always say about Graduate Hotels, we're not developing a product any more. We're developing an experience.