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Hilton Norfolk The Main

A collaboration 10 years in the making is finally open in the city’s downtown

BY C. ELLIOTT MEST
MARCH 2017

For Norfolk, Va., opening the doors of its newest Hilton property has been a 10-year process. What is now Hilton Norfolk The Main is the culmination of two failed development attempts that resulted in demolition once the projects were abandoned, and it almost stayed that way.

When Bruce Thompson, CEO of hotel development and management company Gold Key | PHR, showed interest in Norfolk, he envisioned building a 400-room hotel on the city’s waterfront. But he was convinced to turn his attention downtown in order to build infrastructure and establish a conference center. The city and Gold Key entered into a public/private partnership, with the city building a parking garage and the conference center while Gold Key financed the development of the hotel. All told, the property cost $160 million to bring to life, and more than 180 conferences were booked even before opening. Gold Key owns and manages the property.

“We envisioned a world-class meetings hotel,” Thompson said. “We wanted to have think tanks, heavy investment of technology and a 24-hour continuous break station. Those things are typically a far greater commitment from municipalities than they are inclined to make.”

When meeting with Norfolk city planners, Thompson’s team at Gold Key was told to create a hotel that would create a “renaissance” for the city’s downtown. To draw inspiration, the hotel’s design team visited a number of cities around the U.S., compiling a collage of urban America that would become the vision for the hotel interior.

“To say Thompson is impressed with the result is an understatement. “I’m making a bold statement: There may be bigger buildings in the country’s primary markets, but there is no building from a design perspective, pecad for pence, that comes close to what we’ve put together at The Main,” Thompson said.

The hotel’s lobby consists of a series of escalators—which Thompson refers to as the “anti-form” —contrasted within a 150-foot tall glass box fitted with 21 pieces of contemporary art. The hotel’s structural frame consists of roughly 25 different angles to support glass, elevators and a conference center, which was a challenge given the location of the site. The hotel also operates three food-and-beverage outlets, including a rooftop restaurant. The property is connected to the Selden Arcade, a $60 million, privately funded library, as well as Norfolk’s light rail system.

According to Thompson, no expense was spared on the development of this hotel because he has a strong belief in the city of Norfolk as a meetings destination. He described the market in which Norfolk resides as “insulated,” and said that while the city hasn’t seen the dips other experienced nationally over the years, it also hasn’t benefited from expansion efforts during good times.

“There has been a pullback on financing from other major players, as they see Norfolk as an overbuilt market,” Thompson said. “We see traditional folks trying to finance these projects, and the jury’s still out but we are bullish going here. Norfolk has always been a hamburger and little dog town, but we can move beyond that. I say let’s get out in front of it.”

The developer of the 300-room The Main spared no expense when building the hotel because of the strength of the city as a meetings destination.

“Norfolk has always been a hamburger and hot dog town, but we can move beyond that.”

Bruce Thompson, CEO, Gold Key | PHR

8 QUICK STATS

LOCATION
The hotel is located in downtown Norfolk, and is connected to the Selden Arcade, a privately funded library. The property is surrounded by a number of local businesses and provides access to the light rail station, allowing guests to travel to multiple locations throughout the city. The hotel was built to facilitate a “renaissance” of downtown Norfolk, assisted by its 42,000 square feet of event space.

OPENING
April 2017

NUMBER OF ROOMS
303

GENERAL MANAGER
Stefano Reyes

WEBSITE
www.themainnorfolk.com

OWNER
Gold Key | PHR

MANAGEMENT COMPANY
Gold Key | PHR

OPENING OBSTACLE
Two different attempts to open the property began and ended before development on what is now The Main commenced. Giving the property a tumultuous past. However, in constructing The Main, Bruce Thompson, CEO of Gold Key | PHR, pointed to a tight development site and complicated financing as the greatest challenges associated with the property, though they were able to navigate financing with the help of Hilton and support from the local municipality.