

# The Boston Globe

March 27, 2021

## This Grand Old Lady Is Almost Ready To Show Off Her New Look

By Christopher Muther



Award-winning architect and designer Jeffrey Beers is the visionary behind internationally acclaimed projects such as the Fontainebleau in Miami, the Ritz-Carlton San Juan, and the Four Seasons Vail. But those credentials mattered little to Bostonians when he started designing the public spaces of The Newbury Boston hotel.

The Newbury, which is located at the prime address that once housed the Taj, and is perhaps more fondly remembered as “the old Ritz,” holds a special place in the hearts and histories of many locals. As Beers worked to restore the 1927 hotel, which sits grandly at the intersection of Arlington and Newbury streets, he was given a stern and not-so-tactful warning: “Don’t screw it up.”

“It wasn’t one or two people who told me that,” he said with a laugh. “I heard it about a hundred times. I actually welcomed it. The last thing I wanted to do was have the design overpower the space or the history. I wanted to elevate the hotel and reintroduce this old grand lady. Put her in a new dress and get her ready to step out and have a great evening.”

The old grand lady in the new dress will welcome her first guests in early May (the exact opening date is still pending). The former Taj, which had started looking a little worse for wear by the time it closed in the fall of 2019, has been completely reimagined. From guest rooms that are larger and no longer butter yellow, to a glassed-in rooftop restaurant with stunning views that will take over the duties of the former street-level cafe. The hotel did not disclose the cost of the renovation, only that it was “significant.”

And although the main entrance of the hotel has moved from Arlington to Newbury Street, some favorites will remain intact, such as Saturday and Sunday afternoon tea in the newly remodeled Newbury Salon, where tea was served prior to the renovation, and the still warm but revamped hotel bar.

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“The whole idea was to take a modern, contemporary, and unexpected approach to the interiors,” Beers said. “Obviously it’s all within this rich exterior. I was trying to be very mindful and respectful of certain details. But we played with the furniture, the art, the light, and the color. It was a balance between being respectful and being forward-thinking.”

Despite the pandemic decimating hotel bookings in Boston, the Newbury is one of several high-end properties opening in the coming year. About 70 percent of the Newbury’s prerenovation staff is returning. The hotel will open with 130 employees, increasing to 200 in the coming months. After the Newbury, the Omni Boston Hotel at the Seaport will open this summer. Also opening this summer is the newly renovated Langham Boston. In 2022, Singapore-based luxury hotelier Raffles will open in the Back Bay.



The endeavor of renovating and rebranding the Newbury was a precarious one. The hotel opened as the Ritz-Carlton in 1927 and served as the place to stay and be seen in Boston for glitterati,

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bold names, and monied travelers, so there was much riding on this spring's reopening. Go too modern and avant-garde and the hotel loses its charm, and the memories of nearly 100 years are sullied. Don't push the envelope far enough and the hotel would be unable to compete against the Langham or Raffles.



Although the Newbury will be managed by the hospitality investment company Highgate, the Newbury hotel brand will stand alone. Highgate has a varied portfolio, including the James, the Knickerbocker, and the Row in New York.

The Taj, the old Ritz, or whichever name you choose to use was taken down to the studs and put back together. In other words, the old dame's new dress is not off-the-rack. Informational point: Everyone interviewed for this story referred to the hotel as female.



One part of the Newbury that doesn't feel particularly feminine is the Street Bar. It's still wood-paneled (although a shade or three lighter) with those gorgeous windows that look out onto the

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Public Garden. But the clunky Colonial-style love seats and bulky captain's chairs have been replaced with jewel-tone green banquettes and deep blue club chairs. It's classic enough to appeal to the bar's previous clientele, but with just enough sex appeal to speak to younger drinkers.

The bar will be run by Major Food Group, which operates 20 restaurants in New York, Las Vegas, and Tel Aviv. This will be its first Boston outpost. According to Will Nazar, chief operating officer of MFG, the company "took a deep dive" into the menus of the 1920s and 1930s, when the Ritz opened.



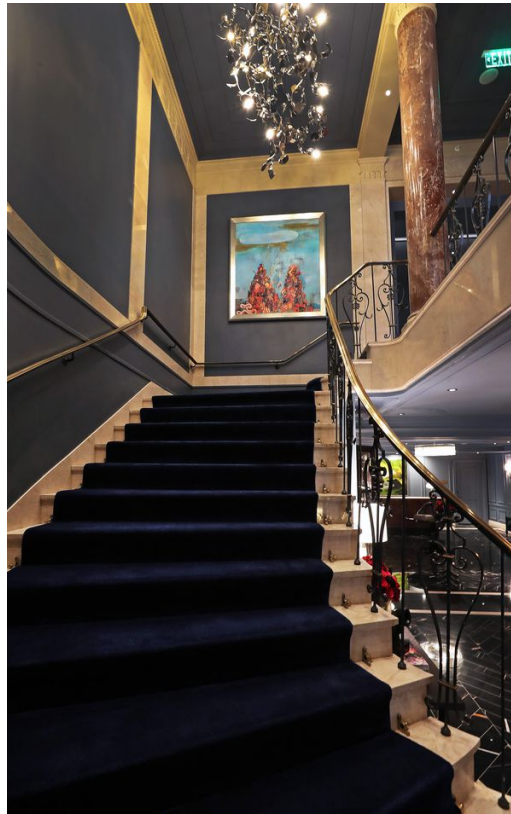
"We found great cocktails, similar to other fine establishments from the time period," Nazar said. "For food, we reinvented their classics: deviled eggs, beef tartare, lobster chowder."

While the bar will open with the hotel, the rooftop restaurant (the name of which has yet to be announced) will be a trattoria "inspired by the old-world resorts of Europe." An executive chef has been chosen but not yet announced. The restaurant will likely be the biggest draw for locals when it opens in June. Also run by MFG, it has retractable glass ceilings and oversized windows that will be opened on warm days, plus one of the best views of the Public Garden that you can legally enjoy with a glass of bourbon in hand. It's a modern homage to the warm summer nights of yore when the Ritz held events on the roof under the stars.

There are touches, such as art commissioned for rooms highlighting scenes of Boston, a library with books curated by the Boston Public Library, a line of bespoke toiletries from Byredo with a scent created for the hotel, and, of course, a butler to tend to your fireplace — if you're lucky enough to be staying in a room with a fireplace — that elevate the renovation beyond surface changes. If you're wondering, and I know you are, room prices will begin just shy of \$600 a night when the hotel opens, and range up to \$10,350 a night for a rambling suite humbly called "The Mansion."

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The rooms at the hotel were reimagined by Alexandra Champalimaud, the award-winning founder of Champalimaud Design. One of the more pressing and technically challenging issues faced by Champalimaud and her team was making the guest rooms larger. When the hotel opened in 1927, the phrase “spa-like” was not used to describe the bathrooms. It can be now.



“The idea of luxury stays has evolved over time,” said Ed Bakos, partner and CEO of Champalimaud Design. “So there’s a point when a historic hotel is not really offering the

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amenities that travelers in 2021 expect. The bathrooms, and the rooms, are small in the buildings from that era.”

Fortunately there was a way to make the rooms larger, which was to narrow the hallways. When the hotel was built, guests needed those larger hallways to wheel their steamer trunks to their rooms. The grander the hallway, the grander the hotel. Not so much in 2021. The hallways are now 18 inches narrower, and, as a result, the rooms are more spacious.

The team from Champalimaud has tackled the Hotel Bel Air, the Beverly Hills Hotel, the Pierre, and the Carlyle. More recently they redesigned the Raffles hotel in Singapore, which is arguably the most romantic hotel in Asia. Their method of design at the Newbury was to determine how travelers to Boston spend time in their hotel rooms.

“How do you get up in the morning and start your day? And what can we as designers do to make a room cater to your needs?” said Elisabeth Rogoff, principal at Champalimaud Design. “We turned the entranceway into a dressing room with closet space because that’s what you do when you get out of the shower.”

Much the way Beers took on the common spaces, the Champalimaud team needed to give the Newbury a local voice by interpreting what luxury means in Boston. This is where the words “charming,” “tailored,” and “intimate” reemerged.



“Making an old hotel new again is really looking at what charms you can bring back to life,” Rogoff said. “There were these gifts just waiting to be taken advantage of. The molding, the beautiful bay windows looking out onto the park. We didn’t have to create them.”

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Another gift she found was being able to talk to the staff, some of whom were at the hotel when it was still the Ritz, to learn about its history and its guests. Perhaps their opinion of the hotel's transformation is what matters most. So what do they think?

"I absolutely love it," said Maureen Albright, who has been at the hotel nearly 20 years as its director of engineering and was named its official historian. The enthusiasm, like Albright herself, seemed completely genuine. "This is more than I ever could have imagined."



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