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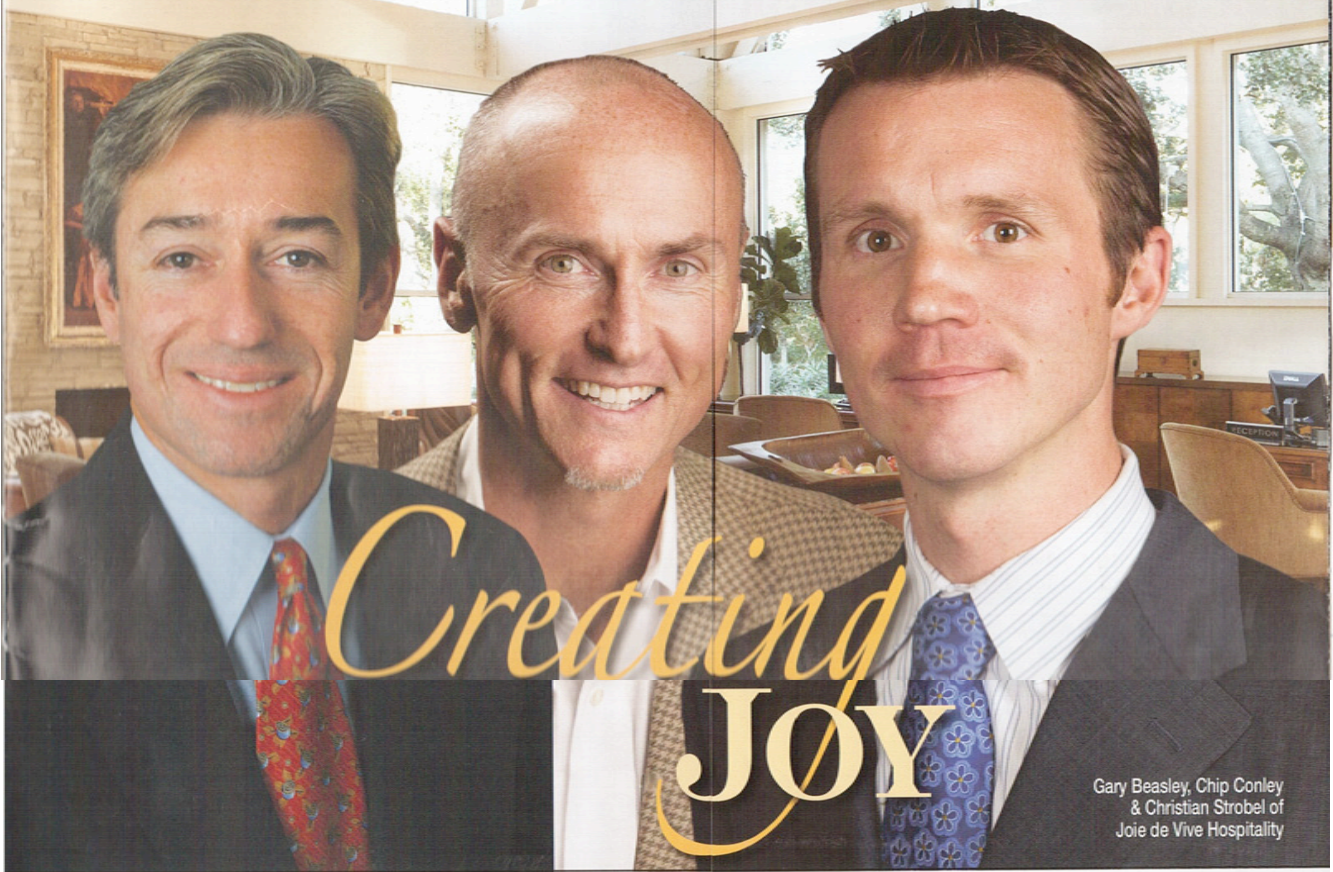
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A Piece of History

Vanderbilt mansion transformed into stunning boutique hotel

By BRUCE SERLEN

When the building your hotel occupies was built in 1908 by the wealthy family of Cornelius Vanderbilt II, you take special care when renovating its gilded interiors. Such was the challenge facing Grace Hotels, a London, England-based owner and operator of luxury boutique hotels that acquired the Newport, RI mansion last year.

"When you're charged with restoring a property of this historical significance, you feel a real responsibility to get it right," managing director Matthew Parent explained to Hotel Business DESIGN® shortly after the hotel debuted as the Vanderbilt Grace.

Although it has a special history and is located in the heart of Newport, one of the country's most historically rich communities, the building is not a museum, but a functioning hotel, Parent pointed out. "Consequently, you want to be respectful, but not necessarily slavish. We've been conscious of adding contemporary elements—from dramatic modern lighting fixtures in the signature restaurant and bar to flat-screen televisions and iPod docking stations in guestrooms—to ensure that today's luxury guests are comfortable and that their expectations are met and even surpassed," he said.

Among other amenities, the hotel today features both indoor and outdoor swimming pools as well as a fitness center and spa treatment rooms, "further examples of the kinds

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of amenities luxury travelers today are looking for," Parent noted.

In its 103-year history, the building has served as a YMCA, the offices of the Newport Restoration Foundation and as a private club. In the mid-1990s, a four-story wing was added to the original building. In a renovation from that period, the 55 guestrooms were converted into 33 larger, more expansive suites, which remains the room count today.

"Over the years, many of the original pieces of furniture and artwork were dispersed, so the pieces you see today, while they are antiques authentic to the period, were added subsequently," Parent explained. Working with New York-based architect and designer Katerina Kourkoulou of the firm Divercity Architects on certain aspects of the project, Parent continues to hunt for and install appropriate pieces in the hotel, even though it is already open. An elaborate 19th Century crystal chandelier that was originally in the Firestone Mansion in Newport, for example, found its way to the market this summer and Parent quickly acquired it. It now hangs in the hotel's entry foyer, welcoming guests. "In this way, the hotel's renovation is more of a restoration and very much a work in progress," he noted.

Kourkoulou's contribution was especially evident in the renovation of The Muse destination restaurant and adjoining bar, created out of first-floor space on one side of the original building. Grace Hotels and its sister brand, U.S. Hotels, are part of the Libra Group, a company based in Athens, Greece, controlled by the Logothetis family. According to Kourkoulou, a contemporary design element was needed to enliven the restaurant and bar spaces and in a nod to the hotel's Greek ownership, striking custom-made light fixtures from Greece were chosen. The color palette in the room—pale blue with gold accents—was selected for two reasons. First, it was consistent with the warm, residential quality of Vanderbilt Grace overall. Second, it effectively highlighted the original artwork that hangs in both The Muse and other public areas of the hotel.

That artwork, a private collection on long-term loan to the hotel, is made up of prime examples from the heyday of American illustration art, many from the 1920s and 1930s. A series of figure studies lines the wall besides the desk where guests check in. Other examples decorate the billiards room, where the wood-paneled walls are a deep cherry red. "We've displayed the art prominently throughout the hotel, not only because it's beautiful, but because it seems to echo the Gilded Age elegance of the original mansion," Parent explained.

The color palette in guestrooms is fairly neutral with pale greens and creams predominating. The bedding package includes a white pillow-top mattress and white linens with decorative pillows in a shade of burnt orange for contrast. The sheets, pillow cases, and duvet as well as the bathroom towels are by Baltic Linen and Frette bathrobes hang in the closet. In the bathroom, the make-up mirror is by Baci. Grohe did the bathroom fixtures, except the toilet, which is by Caroma.

