

November 29, 2016

Step inside – and back in time – at new Wicker Park hotel and upscale hostel

By Josh Noel



A couple of landmark buildings have been transformed into hip new lodging in Wicker Park

For all of **The Robey's** elegant touches and urbane cool, the power of the hotel that opens Wednesday lies in a feature no modern-day designer could concoct: the location of the 87-year-old building.

Perched at one of the city's most notable intersections — Damen, North and Milwaukee avenues — The Robey vaults to immediate prominence if for no other reason than where it sits, at the center of the action in the bustling Wicker Park neighborhood.

The Robey's developers felt the weight of the historic art deco skyscraper and its location during a four-year renovation but also tried to embrace it.

"We did not want to impose anything on a building so emblematic to the neighborhood," said Carlos Couturier, co-founder of Mexico City-based Grupo Habita, which operates the hotel. "The challenge was to maintain its identity and spirit through our work."

Where it could, Couturier said, Grupo Habita kept original touches and aesthetics in the handsome, wedge-shaped Northwest Tower flatiron building, whose new name pays homage to Robey Street, the predecessor of what's now called Damen Avenue.

The lobby's dominant feature remains the building's original dark green marble and brass. A revolving wood door facing Milwaukee Avenue was restored by its Indiana manufacturer. Even the directory from the former office building was kept. Elsewhere, the hotel nods to the building's history — like the frosted glass on guest-room doors, which evokes the old offices. But The Robey mostly aims to create something new in a neighborhood rife with shopping, restaurants and pedestrians.

Inspired by what Couturier described as Edward Hopper's art and Frank Lloyd Wright's design, the hotel has an early-to-mid-20th-century motif of clean lines and elegant simplicity. The first-floor restaurant, Cafe Robey, evokes European cafes with both its design and menu (steak frites,

Spanish grilled octopus). The space directly above, on the second floor, does something similar with a lounge-meets-Euro-style cafe where wine, espresso and spritzes will be served. In a bid to integrate into the neighborhood, both are open to the public.

The hotel's 69 rooms are composed of wood, marble, frosted glass and terrazzo floors with lights that operate on dimmer switches. However, the property's biggest asset arguably is its views, especially from the rooms overlooking the six-corner intersection. The show stopper is the roof deck, which offers the rare vantage of the Chicago skyline looking east — from the [John Hancock Center](#) to Willis Tower, and the lake just beyond. The roof deck also features a bar and seating for a few dozen people. The space will be open only in the evening; it's accessible to the public with a reservation.

"I'm amazed by people from Chicago coming up here and saying, 'Oh wow,'" Couturier said. Who, exactly, will be drawn to the hotel is a bit of a mystery. Leisure travelers wanting to embrace Chicago's neighborhoods and culture couldn't do any better than The Robey. Ditto for locals and suburbanites wanting a getaway in their hometown.

But business travelers, who are the engine of downtown travel, are the bigger question. Presuming that most work and meetings happen downtown, will they want to stay 3 miles from the Loop?

Couturier is betting yes — at least, the most adventurous business travelers who see staying in a vibrant neighborhood as an advantage. As he notes, the Blue Line rumbles just outside the hotel and is only a handful of stops from downtown. A taxi ride is all of 15 minutes.

While Couturier calls The Robey "the past meets the present," he thinks of his company's neighboring property, The Hollander, as "the present meets the future."

A hostel with 65 beds in 20 rooms, The Hollander is housed in the old Hollander Fireproof Warehouse, a six-story building dating to 1905 that's immediately west of The Robey. Couturier shies from calling The Hollander a hostel, preferring to describe it as a "universe of people." Emphasizing the social aspect of a stay, The Hollander encourages guests to link their reservation to their Instagram account so fellow guests can check out one another in advance of their visit.

"It's about a social experience," he said.

A triangular pool on the roof of The Hollander — more for taking a dip with a view of downtown than a swim — will open in spring, along with a bar featuring a small kitchen serving Mediterranean food.

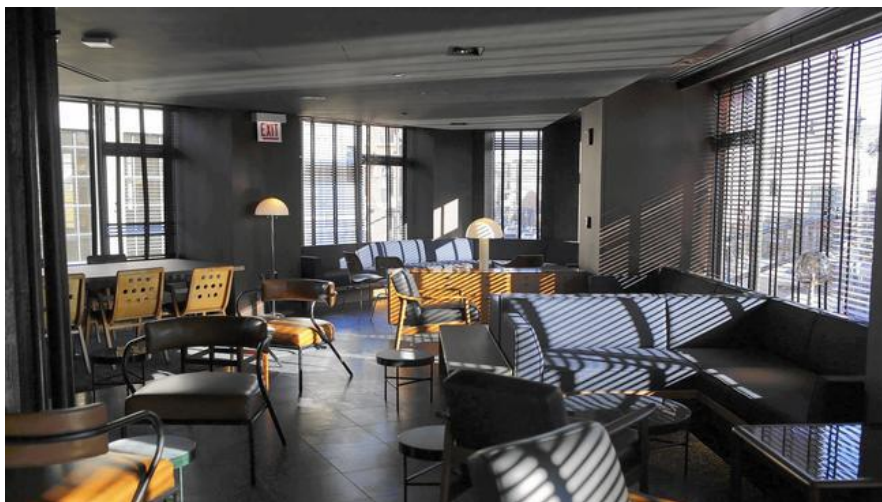
The average starting rate at The Robey, 2018 W. North Ave., is \$175 a night (www.therobey.com). Rates at The Hollander, 2022 W. North Ave., typically begin at \$45 a bed per night or \$165 for a private room (www.thehollander.com).



Prime Location: The old Northwest Tower, a three-sided flatiron building in Wicker Park at Milwaukee, Damen and North avenues, has found new life as The Robey hotel.



Cafe Robey: Cafe Robey's menu features European favorites like steak frites and Spanish grilled octopus.



Lounging: One of the sleek lounges in the new Robey hotel, which opens Nov. 30.



Stylist decor: The Robey has an early-to-mid-20th-century motif of clean lines and elegant simplicity.



Bar: The bar at The Robey's rooftop lounge.



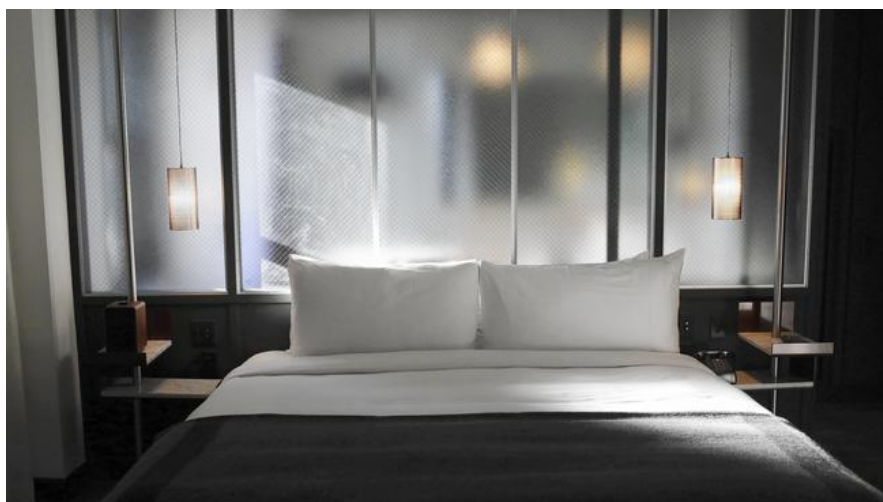
Rooftop: You don't have to be a guest at The Robey to enjoy the rooftop lounge, but you'll need a reservation.



When you have to work: A desk area in a room at The Robey.



Tasteful: The Robey has 69 rooms.



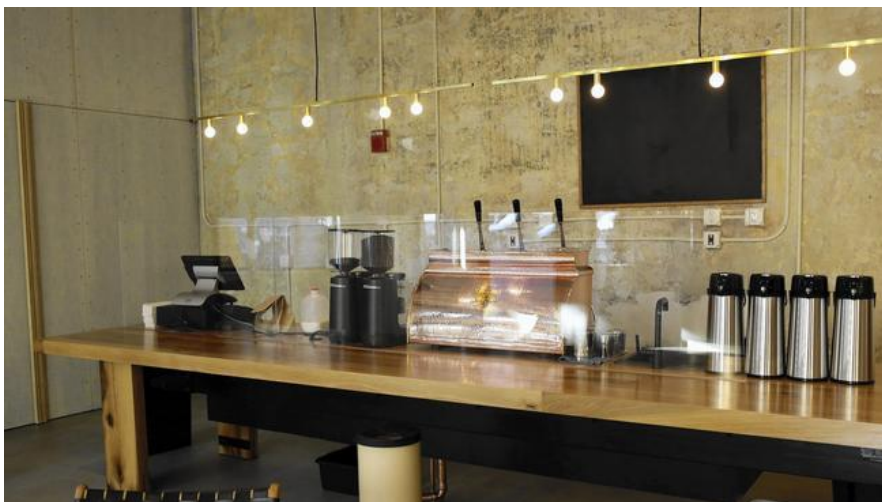
Bedtime: A room in the new Robey hotel, where the average starting rate is \$175 a night.



Morning sun: A room in The Robey hotel, built in the old Northwest Tower in Wicker Park.



Bathroom: A bathroom in The Robey.



Coffee bar: The coffee bar in the lobby of the new Hollander, an upscale hostel next to The Robey.



The Hollander: The lobby of The Hollander, where guests can share a room with strangers or book a private room.



Laundry: Guests can use washers and dryers in The Hollander



Upscale hostel: Business cards sit on the front desk in The Hollander, which opens Nov. 30



Sharing: A hostel with 65 beds in 20 rooms, The Hollander is housed in the old Hollander Fireproof Warehouse in Wicker Park.