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The New Old Commodore Hotel

The Commodore Hotel in Astoria, Oregon (population 10,000) is not exactly conveniently located, tucked away near the ocean's edge at the mouth of the Columbia River. But the mysterious tale of the hotel's past is enough to draw visitors for a night or two in the now-modern quarters of the historic getaway.

By: Charlotte West

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Built in 1925, the Commodore was originally a travelers' hotel for passengers waiting to board the ferries that crossed the Columbia River to Washington state. In 1965, the owner unexpectedly boarded up the building and walked away. Forty years later, Paul Caruana, Brian Faherty and Lance Marrs took over the dormant establishment and gave it a new lease on life.

When the three developers unlocked the door in 2007, they found themselves stepping back into a bygone era. It took a year and a half and \$1.5 million to bring the place into the present, with the architectural assistance of Cannon Beach-based Ecola Architects and interior design by Portland-based Osmose Design. In May 2009, the Commodore reopened for business.



The hotel interior sports a distinct maritime feel combined with a pinch of Scandinavian minimalism. Osmose Design created an entire wall in the lobby displaying objects unearthed during renovation. While the original version of the Commodore had 30+ rooms, the reincarnated hotel features eight larger rooms with ensuite bathrooms and 10 smaller 'cabins' with a European-style set-up, with shared toilets and showers down the hall. Prices range from \$69 to \$89 for the smaller rooms, and \$129 to \$179 for the larger suites.

I asked developer Lance Marrs about the process of bringing the Commodore into the 21st century without letting go of its rich history.

What made you take on this particular property as a pet project?

For some time, Brian and I had been looking for a project in Astoria. As it turns out, so was Paul. It was an easy partnership and we all had prior history with one another. All three of us are crazy passionate about Astoria and the architecture is so rich and largely intact with a real downtown.

What were your thoughts the moment you first stepped inside the "time capsule"?

My first step was an emotional one. Untouched. What an honor to be chosen by The Commodore to bring him/her back to life! We were under the impression that not much had changed up there since the sixties. Still though, nothing quite prepares one for the overwhelming visuals (and smells). It was emotional. Still is.

Who is this mysterious character you call the Commodore? Does the moniker refer to an actual person?

The Commodore is a fictitious character, indeed, a spirit.



What was your overall approach to the renovation and interior design? What were the challenges in working with a historic building?

The approach from the outset was to honor the past while easing the Commodore into the present. Great care was spent in maintaining the character of the building: restoring the woodwork and hardware, keeping the original windows, restoring and reintroducing the transoms and storefront. Much of this was required in order to place it on the historical register but we went way above and beyond the requirements. It was a two-year project that included the survival of a major storm – the roof was blown off, among other things.



What have you done to combine authentic, original details with modern design?

It is truly a marriage of period architecture with modern amenities. All of the original doors are there and the floors were refinished, as was all of the woodwork. The original radiators were restored and re-plumbed, as were the sinks (apron sinks) in each of the 18 rooms, of course with the addition of a modern faucet.

The mirrors hung sideways in the rooms were originally mirrors on top of antique hutches – discovered in the hotel. We

turned them on end both for a subtle design statement but also to honor the past from a different perspective.

We hired an artist to design the piece in the stairwell and also commissioned the room pieces. Osmose Design was hired to fine tune and conceptualize the rooms and lobby: they are responsible for the lobby fixture and wall of objects. The beds are of a high quality as are the IPOD docking stations and televisions.

The overall original palette is so rich that care was taken not to fill up the room with unnecessary trappings. Great design at a price that all can afford. The timing has been good for the reality of where the economy stands today.

I know there is all sorts of speculation as to why the original owner boarded up The Commodore in 1965, but do you have any particular theories of your own?

We believe that The Commodore was tired. None of the speculation has been confirmed, quite honestly.

What was the oddest object you came across during the renovation?

A second floor check-in desk and bad sixties porn.

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