

DOWNTOWN MIAMI

Miami hotel and its occupants get second chance

Eighty recently homeless men and women are among the hundred moving into the faithfully restored 1923 Royalton Hotel in downtown Miami.

Posted on Tue, Sep. 23, 2008

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The Royalton at 131 SE 1st street is a historical hotel from the 1920s. It was a rundown travelodge until a couple of years ago, and now it's been restored as a residence shelter for the recently homeless. This is Lillie Pierce, who wants apartment #704.

- [Video](#) | Restored hotel a haven for formerly homeless

The Royalton, one of the last of the 1920s Land Boom hotels in downtown Miami, has been treated to a faithful historic renovation: From period doors and light fixtures to the poured terrazzo lobby floor, the formerly gone-to-seed building is once again a solid citizen on Southeast First Street.

Add wireless Internet and energy-saving upgrades and it's the kind of painstaking makeover you might expect for a loft conversion, or a boutique hotel, or a yuppie condo.

Only it's none of the above.

Instead, its new residents are people like Westley Hosey Jr., who lost his job and his home more than a year ago. Or Lillie Pierce, ill with diabetes and heart problems, whose previous address was the Salvation Army. Or Valencia Davis, who is nearly sightless and had been living, as she put it, "from shelter to shelter, door to door."

"It's like angels come in and saved me," Davis said.

The Royalton this month reopened its arched entranceway to its fortunate tenants -- 100 people with very low incomes, 80 of them recently homeless, many of them with disabilities.

The unusual project is the product of a collaboration between a nonprofit agency and a for-profit developer of affordable housing. They raised \$18.5 million by combining Wall Street investments, government grants and federal tax credits given to encourage renovation of historic buildings.

A COMEBACK

"That's a wonderful example of re-using buildings for something meaningful instead of starting from scratch," said Ellen Uguccione, the city of Miami's historic preservation chief. "There is life in those old buildings."

The do-over extends beyond masonry to the Royalton's new occupants. The project's nonprofit partner, Carrfour Supportive Housing, will provide intensive services, including in-house counseling and help with finding jobs, to ensure its formerly homeless tenants -- all of whom have leases and pay rent -- remain securely housed. Residents must have been clean and sober for six months and submit to random testing.

It's a model Carrfour has refined in the 15 years since its founding by the Homeless Committee of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce. The independent agency now houses about 650 people in apartments in more than half a dozen buildings in Miami-Dade County. Carrfour claims a success rate of more than 90 percent, meaning all but a few of its tenants remain permanently off the streets.

The seven-story Royalton is the largest of the agency's projects and the only historic building. It was a complex undertaking that required an experienced developer with expertise and access to financing, said Carrfour President Stephanie Berman.

Enter Carlisle Development Group, which has built scores of affordable housing units for profit by cobbling together money from private and government sources.

For Carlisle, one challenge was figuring out how to reconfigure the old hotel to meet modern building codes and the needs of its residents, including handicapped accessibility. And it had to do so while respecting the building's historic integrity -- a requirement for use of National Parks Service historic tax credits.

That meant hiring an architect specializing in historic restoration, Les Beilinson of Miami Beach, and engaging historic consultants to pore over old photographs of the Royalton to figure out how it looked in its heyday. They even scraped through several layers of paint to uncover the building's original exterior color, a mustard yellow, which it bears again today.

A MARQUEE PROJECT

"This is a marquee project for us," said Carlisle President Matthew Greer. "We can say, 'Look what we did with the Royalton.'"

It also meant persuading wary investors they could earn a return from the project.

"It took a lot of education to get investors comfortable with homeless residents," Greer said. "It's a different proposition than they're used to."

Built in 1923 in a Classical Revival style, the Royalton, at 131 SE First St., is in the Downtown Historic District. It's around the corner from the grandly restored Olympia Theater at the Gusman Cultural Center and next door to a long-neglected gem, the vacant 1925 City National Bank Building, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The Royalton somehow avoided the fate of other downtown hotels from the era that turned into flophouses. It operated as a budget-chain hotel until Carrfour bought it in 2004 for \$3.5 million, though the agency's Berman said it was by then "a sad sight," run-down and hobbled by structural problems.

Carlisle gutted much of the interior, reconfigured the upper floors into 100 compact studio apartments, reopened the entrance arches, which had been blocked off for years, and restored the lobby, going so far as to hunt for a terrazzo contractor who could accurately replicate the original floor's textures and colors.

"People have more pride when they live in a great facility," Greer said. 'It says, `You *can* live in a beautiful building.' "

The ground floor will comprise lounging areas for residents, a computer lab, meeting rooms for Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous and offices for Carrfour's four on-site staff members.

Tenants' apartments are fully furnished. Rents run from \$130 to \$630 a month, depending on occupants' incomes. Twenty of the units are going to low-income singles, including foster children who at 18 have "aged out" of the state system.

"To me, this is a blessing," said Hosey, 42, who had been living in shelters or crashing on friends' couches before moving in this past week. ``It's much better than where I am and where I have been."

For Carrfour, the choice of downtown was no coincidence: Its plentiful public transit and shopping enhances independence for Royalton residents. Though many have jobs, few have cars.

For Davis, 34, taking up residence at the Royalton after years of living in shelters means a whole new life: not just the guidance from Carrfour's counselors, a cozy home and access to medical care -- but parks, concerts and a scenic bayfront a short stroll away.

"I can stay strong, be healthy," she said. ``I'm going to get the opportunity for a whole lot of miracles."