



GRAND AGAIN

The restoration of the former Hotel Syracuse was accomplished through the collaboration of numerous SU alumni

BY DENISE OWEN HARRIGAN



SINCE THE IMPECCABLY RESTORED HOTEL Syracuse reopened in late summer, it's been a magnet for Syracuse alumni and parents, in town for football games, Orange Central homecoming, and other rites of autumn. One September morning, Edward M. Riley '78, the hotel's new owner—and many say savior—surveys the busy lobby and says, "It's great to see the Orange shirts back."

In fact, the hotel has been ablaze with Orange talent and passion throughout its \$76 million restoration. Like Riley, the majority of the key players are Syracuse alumni. And they're earning thunderous applause for

their magnificent contribution to the city's revitalization.

The iconic Hotel Syracuse, now operating as the Marriott Syracuse Downtown, has been the city's crown architectural jewel since it opened in 1924. But after a glorious 50-year run, coinciding with Syracuse's reign as a major industrial city, the hotel slid slowly downhill, declared bankruptcy, and closed in 2004. For a decade, the vacant hotel cast a long shadow over the southeast corner of the city. Unheated, deteriorating, and entangled in liens, it seemed destined for demolition, until its almost miraculous



Ed Riley '78 (top right) led the resurrection of the former Hotel Syracuse, guiding it from crumbling abandonment to its original grandeur.

rescue by Riley, an architect with 40 years of experience in design, construction, real estate development, and hotel operations. Equally pertinent, in the Hotel Syracuse saga, is the fact that Riley is a native son.

As a fifth-generation Syracusan, he appreciates the hotel's starring role in the city's social history. Riley went to family weddings and his own senior ball at the Hotel Syracuse. "More than once," he admits, "I have been asked to leave the hotel for singing too loudly at St. Patrick's Day celebrations. This is where our community gathers to celebrate. I couldn't watch it reduced to a pile of bricks."

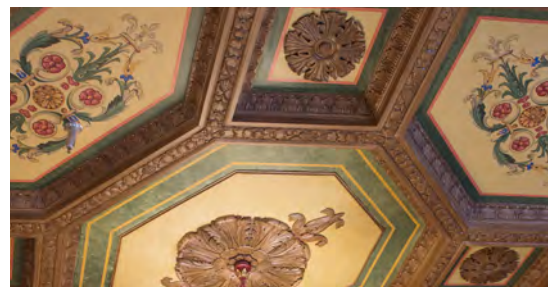
With three massive towers, eleven floors, and more than 600 original rooms, the hotel commands a full city block between Salina and Warren streets in downtown Syracuse. It was de-

signed by William Stone Post of George B. Post & Sons, New York, whose portfolio includes the New York Stock Exchange. During its heyday, the Hotel Syracuse hosted business travelers, five presidents, and a steady stream of celebrities. For locals, including the Syracuse University community, it was the world-class backdrop for special celebrations, large and small. Pat Cain Beyle '56 and Thad Beyle '56, G'60 celebrated their wedding in its Grand Ballroom. "We had 300 guests and an 18-piece band," Pat Beyle remembers. "It was a grand place."

The hotel was slightly less grand in 1973, when one of its floors housed Syracuse students awaiting the completion of Skytop Apartments. According to Bob Cohen '75, "It was a sweltering September, and the rooms were air conditioned. All our friends from school came down to cool off. The hotel was past its hey-



During its heyday, the Hotel Syracuse was a center for community celebrations and welcomed everyone from wedding parties to celebrities and presidents. Over time, the hotel fell into disrepair. Today, as the Marriott Syracuse Downtown, the hotel proudly displays a 40-foot mural, created by an SU professor, above the reception desk. Cloaked behind mirrors when restoration work began, the mural was repaired and is now, once again, a central focus of the lobby.



day, but that air conditioning was a big plus."

Just as the Hotel Syracuse reflected the city's midcentury prosperity, it later mirrored its decline. As city residents and businesses fled to the suburbs, the hotel limped along for decades, with occupancy rates as low as 6 percent. In 2004, the Hotel Syracuse closed, bankrupt and \$20 million in debt.

On the positive side, Syracuse's tepid economy helped to preserve the Hotel Syracuse. The city lacked the vitality to tear it down and replace it with something new. And, paradoxically, the sluggish economy helped Riley develop precisely the skills he would one day need to save the hotel.

Riley, after earning his architecture license, set up shop in Syracuse. As the Armory Square district came to life, he tackled his first historic restorations: the Bentley Settle and Piper-Phillips buildings. He had his first taste of real estate development during a decade with Pioneer Companies in Syracuse. By the 1990s, however, more promising opportunities beckoned far from home. Riley took a job with Marriott International, developing resorts in Hawaii. But he never uprooted his wife, Janet, and their three children from their suburban Syracuse home. For years, he says, "I commuted to work from Camillus to Hawaii."

In 2005, Riley joined the Boston-based Pyramid Hotel Group (unrelated to The Pyramid Companies in Syracuse), which specialized in restoring and operating historic hotels. With Pyramid, Riley oversaw the \$60 million restoration of the Arizona Biltmore in Phoenix, the \$35 million restoration of the Claremont Hotel in San Francisco, and the \$30 million restoration of the Fairfax Hotel on Embassy Row in Washington, D.C. In 2013, when Riley was traveling about 300,000 miles a year as senior vice president of project management, he brought the deteriorating Hotel Syracuse—with broken pipes, a leaking roof, and crumbling plaster—to his company's attention. "It was in the roughest shape of any hotel I'd seen," Riley says. "This looked like its last chance."

A MONUMENTAL CHALLENGE

Pyramid looked closely at the hotel's liens and decided to walk away. Riley looked at the same challenges and decided to leave Pyramid and tackle the project on his own. It was the biggest decision of his life, Riley later admitted at a forum sponsored by the Syracuse Media Group. "I had a skill set in my profession to restore buildings," he says. "You can't build history. Why not bring the old gal back to her former glory?"



To handle the hotel's historic preservation work, Ed Riley called on Jamie Williams '87 (left) and Bruce King '73 (right) of Holmes King Kallquist & Associates of Syracuse.

Not that his decision was purely sentimental. "In the prior 10 years, I'd seen a sea change in Syracuse," Riley says. "It was on its way to a much better downtown. I knew if the city wanted to be a player, it would need a first-class hotel." Riley also knew he would need a first-class restoration team for the monumental work ahead. He reached out to hospitality architect Mario LaGuardia '78 of MLG in New York. LaGuardia had worked worldwide for such luxury hotel clients as Mandarin Oriental, W, Peninsula, and St. Regis. Though LaGuardia and Riley were classmates at Syracuse, they had never crossed paths. But they clicked immediately in 2002, when they worked together at the Turning Stone Resort in Verona, New York, where LaGuardia was the architect in charge of a \$350 million expansion.

At the Hotel Syracuse, LaGuardia's role was architect and master planner. One of his many challenges was to reconfigure the 600 guest rooms into 320 rooms with the modern elegance and high-tech amenities that contemporary guests expect. "A hotel is like a city within a city, with public and private spaces," LaGuardia says. "Our challenge was to create a seamless experience between the two without damaging the historic character of the public spaces."

For the hotel's historic preservation work, Riley turned to Bruce King '73 and James F. Williams '87 of Holmes King Kallquist & Associates in Syracuse. They had been involved in the hotel's earlier renovations, as well as local restoration projects in the Nettleton Factory building, State Tower Building, and Landmark Theatre. King and Williams were responsible for the hotel's historic public spaces—both exterior and interior, including the street-level storefronts and restaurants. Under historic preservation guidelines, King explains, these areas can be restored but not significantly altered. Since the hotel corridors are considered public spaces, all the original guest room doors had to remain in place, even though the number of rooms was reduced by half.



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—ED RILEY '78

Each of the coffin doors—named for the hollow compartments where guests left laundry for hotel pickup—was removed and refinished by Stickley-Audi & Co. of nearby Manlius.

When the restored Hotel Syracuse was unveiled, the lobby, Grand Ballroom, and Persian Terrace were jaw dropping, with their magnificent chandeliers, hand-painted plaster ceilings, and colorful murals restored to their original luster. But the architects' responsibilities went far beyond these eye-catching elements. "The breadth of this project was mind-blowing," Williams says. "Architecture is a mix of art and science. The real angst, in this project, came from addressing issues like the rusted steel beams that had blown out the brick facing under the parapets."

The hotel's basic structure was actually in good shape, according to Riley. "So much good character was still here." The previous owners had built walls and used paint to conceal damage. That helped to protect the original surfaces. "We could peel back and find treasures buried everywhere," Riley says.

One of the biggest treasures was a 40-foot mural discovered above the reception desk. The painting, by the late Carl Roters, a fine arts professor at Syracuse, depicts the first 100 years of the city's history. In the 1980s, when brass and glass were in fashion, the mural was covered with mirrors. During Riley's restoration, its original varnish was removed, revealing the artist's vibrant colors and expressive brush strokes. The mural is once again the focal point of the spectacular lobby.

For the architects, designing the two ground-floor restaurants was especially rewarding. The lobby's placement on the second floor made it important to have visible activity at the street level. "What happens on the street and inside the hotel reinforce each other," LaGuardia says. "It creates liveliness, a sense that something's happening here."

Williams, for instance, cites the way the hotel's new Eleven



Three years of restoration work required plenty of attention to fine details, including the ornate designs in the Grand Ballroom (above) and the Persian Terrace (top left, facing page).

Waters restaurant and patio extend into the street. “It creates the interactive feeling of a town square,” he says.

A SHARED PASSION

They say it takes a village to raise a child. Riley knew from experience it would take the city, the county, and the state to help revive the massive landmark. Fortunately, from his earliest overtures, Riley attracted influential people—government officials, politicians, attorneys, bankers, and everyday citizens—who shared his passion for the project.

One of the first to go to bat for Riley was Ben Walsh G’05, who was the city’s director of economic development under Mayor Stephanie Miner ’92. After the hotel closed in 2004, a series of out-of-town developers had expressed interest, according to Walsh. “There were a lot of false starts,” he says. “But when I met Ed in 2013, the conversation immediately felt different. He understood what the hotel meant to the city. He wasn’t interested in shortcuts. So many earlier plans didn’t do the building justice.”

Walsh’s initial challenge was to untangle the liens from the hotel’s bankruptcy. When the city was unable to take title to the hotel through tax foreclosure—lien holders foiled every effort—Walsh and the Syracuse Industrial Development Agency (SIDA) went to court to take the property through eminent domain. Walsh remembers the day the city finally transferred the title



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to Riley. “It felt too good to be true,” Walsh says. “But I’ve felt that way about Ed since the day I met him.”

The next big challenge was to help find funding for the \$76 million restoration. Riley had about \$700,000 of his own money in the project and a handful of committed private investors. But the restoration would rely heavily on bank loans as well as historic preservation tax credits, state grants, and real-estate tax breaks in the form of a PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) agreement through SIDA. To help navigate these complicated funding streams, Riley brought Al Gough ’80 on board as CFO. Another suburban Syracusean with fond memories of the Hotel Syracuse, Gough has credentials that include a decade with Syracuse’s Pyramid Management Group, where he was involved in the complex permanent funding of the Carousel Center mall. The Hotel Syracuse finances are far more complicated. “My biggest challenge has been wrapping my head around the flow of funds in and out,” Gough says. “We’ve had to expand from one company to seven to comply with all the reporting and regulations required by the structure of the deal.”

One of the project’s memorable financial milestones was when Onondaga County, under County Executive Joanie Mahoney ’87, L’90, committed a \$15 million state grant to the Hotel Syracuse, in exchange for its partnership with the county’s convention center. Another red-letter day was when Allen Naples ’73 of M&T

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Ever popular with the SU community since its earliest days, the hotel welcomed Chancellor Kent Syverud (above right) and alumni to the Persian Terrace for the Melvin A. Eggers Senior Alumni Award Luncheon during Orange Central this fall.

Bank approved a commercial loan for the restoration.

WSYR-TV news anchor Carrie Lazarus '80, in the documentary special *Extraordinary: Hotel Syracuse*, describes Naples as “the banker who changed his mind.” Naples’s original response to Riley’s loan application was “No way. I’ve lost money on the hotel in the past. I’m not doing it again.” But after his assistant showed him some of Riley’s restoration work, Naples reversed his decision and soon became one of the project’s biggest advocates.

The hotel’s original electrical power panel now hangs in Naples’s office—a gift from Riley, in recognition of the banker’s role in helping to power the restoration.

What’s helped Riley power through three years of relentless restoration pressure? Some of his resilience dates back to his student days. “It’s madness the way architecture students are trained,” LaGuardia says. Adds Riley, “They lock you up in Slocum Hall, and you do not leave the school.” And yet, both agree, that pressure—and their professors—created an unquenchable passion for architecture.

Some of Riley’s tireless effort is inspired by the project’s tangible impact on the local economy. During the restoration, Riley hired an estimated 450 people, 90 percent of them local. When the hotel is fully operational, it will employ 250 permanent workers—even more if its social catering operations are as successful as predicted. After all, consider there were more than 130 weddings scheduled before the hotel had officially reopened.

Riley is also propelled by the sense that the hotel—as big as it is—is part of something much bigger: a renaissance in downtown Syracuse. A number of businesses are leaving suburban office parks and moving back into the city. In the past decade,

the downtown population has increased by 57 percent to 3,400 people, largely because of millennials’ interest in urban living, according to Merike Treier, executive director of the Downtown Committee of Syracuse. Multiple major restoration projects are underway. A block from the hotel, the former Dey Brothers department store has been transformed into 64 apartments, all of them leased. “People throughout history have been drawn to the density of cities,” says Robert Doucette G’76, L’84 of Armory Development, co-developer of the Dey Brothers, Sibley’s, and Loew’s buildings. “Young people especially love the urban energy and the street-level mix of shops, restaurants, bars, and nightlife.”

In the 1980s, Doucette—refusing to accept that downtown was dead—was an early investor in Armory Square, which soon evolved into a thriving, trendy neighborhood. Three decades later, the entire downtown is percolating, fueled largely by the restoration of historic buildings. “The Hotel Syracuse restoration proves that huge things can happen when businesses, banks, government, and individuals work together,” Doucette says.

Walsh echoes that thought. “It’s the only project I’ve worked on that truly transcends politics,” he says. “Everyone set aside their own personal agendas and worked toward a common goal. It makes me wonder what else we can accomplish as a community.”

Riley, it seems, has revived a sense of community through the project, demonstrating what can be achieved with vision, commitment, and collaboration. Reflecting on the entire experience, Riley says it reminds him of rowing crew. “Everyone pulled the oars together in the same direction, guided by what’s best for the community,” he says. «