

Sacramento Business Journal - March 16, 2009
[/sacramento/stories/2009/03/16/focus5.html](#)

SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

ELDORADO PLAZA SACRAMENTO TOWER

Friday, March 13, 2009 | Modified: Thursday, April 2, 2009

Project of the Year / Best Rehab/Renovation: The Citizen Hotel

Sacramento Business Journal - by [Robert Celaschi](#) Correspondent

Location: 926 J St., Sacramento

Developer: [Rubicon Partners Inc.](#)

Contractor: [Wentz Group Construction Services](#)

Architect: [Vitae Architects](#)

Engineer: [Miyamoto International Inc.](#)

Size: 135,000 square feet, 197 rooms

Cost: \$35 million

Sacramento's latest luxury hotel began its life as one of the city's earliest highrises. The judges were unanimous in praising [The Citizen Hotel](#) as the winner of the Rehab/Renovation category and Project of the Year.

"We were blown away by the scope and scale of it," judge Adam Nelson said. "This project brings something different and new to Sacramento, something that everyone who has lived in Sacramento has wanted for a long time."

Built in 1926 as the California Western States Life Insurance Building, the classic 14-story structure started out as a prestige address for lawyers, financial firms and other professionals.

"In its day it was the address in town. If you were anybody, you were in that building," judge Tyler Babcock said.

But after 80 years of steady use the building had drifted to the lower rungs of the commercial real estate market. When Rubicon Partners Inc. bought it in 2005 with the intention of rehabbing it into office condos, there wasn't much inside that could be saved. Rubicon had to strip it down to the shell and floor plates, and even those needed repair work.

The notion of turning the building into a hotel came from San Francisco boutique hotelier [JDV Hotels Inc.](#) The company operates 40 properties under the [Joie de Vivre Hospitality](#) brand.

"Sacramento is really the only major city from Vancouver to San Diego that did not have a sizable landmark boutique hotel in its downtown," said Chip Conley, founder and chief executive officer of Joie de Vivre.

That wasn't for lack of trying. For a decade people had been urging JDV to consider the old Elks building, another 1926 skyscraper a few blocks down J Street. But the Elks building didn't have enough square footage, Conley said. The old Cal Western building had the room, plus a nicer setting right across the street from a park. It also had windows that would line up well once the interiors had been reconfigured to hotel rooms.

Without even looking inside, Conley made the proposal.

"It just was extremely fortunate timing," said Kipp Blewett, a principal partner and co-founder of Rubicon Partners. The decks were clear but Rubicon had not started rebuilding inside.

That's not to say it was an easy job.

"Stuffing a four-star hotel into an 80-year-old shell had about every challenge you could imagine," Blewett said.

Every system had to be upgraded: electrical, plumbing, lights and windows. The building needed a seismic upgrade, and the developers had to remove lead and asbestos.

In the process they did find a few gems that could stay, such as marble panels around the elevator core, covered for decades by wallboard.

To set a goal for the interior design, Conley tried to distill the idea of a Sacramento citizen in five words, what he called a psychographic profile of the community: authentic, eclectic, all-American, influential and surprising. The last word refers to outsiders who haven't yet recognized "that there are elements to Sacramento that are sophisticated, stylish and even

MEDIA



hip," Conley said.

Among the expressions of surprise inside the hotel is a small bar on the mezzanine level called Scandal, right off the lobby. The name also taps into the theme of state politics reflected in some of the editorial cartoons that decorate walls throughout the hotel.

With 198 rooms and suites, The Citizen bumps the upper reaches of "boutique" size, but Conley noted that it is still small relative to the major downtown chain hotels it competes with, including the **Hyatt Regency** and the **Sheraton Grand**.

The rooms have modern technology, including high-definition LCD TVs, MP3/iPod sound systems, wired and wireless Internet connections and in-room laptop safes.

But the decor aims to fit the era of the exterior.

"The carpet selection, wallpapers and lighting fixtures challenge your sense that it is new," Babcock said. "You love to see a building reborn in such a positive way as this. This is not your cookie-cutter lodging experience. It doesn't have any of the aspects of corporate hospitality."

The rooms also come in more than two dozen configurations, which judge Samantha Kersting found more inviting than repeating the same room every 20 steps down a corridor.

The hotel also has the 153-seat Grange restaurant and bar, a 3,000-square-foot tented terrace deck with a view of the Capitol, 11,000 square feet of space for meetings and conferences, and a business center with Windows and Mac computers.

Opening a hotel in a weak economy is tough, Conley said, but the restaurant started exceeding expectations right away, and The Citizen booked dozens of weddings, retirement parties and corporate events before it opened.

"We worked really hard on the detail to present something that would make Sacramentans feel proud of being Sacramentans," Blewett said. "A lot of times projects get talked about downtown and never happen. This is one that actually got done."

It also took an 80-year-old building and breathed another 50 years of life into it, judge Etienne Louw said. "That, to me, is a very large statement in terms of sustainability."



All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.