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Renaissance Hotels Hopes Its New York Flagship Will Have You Posting To Instagram



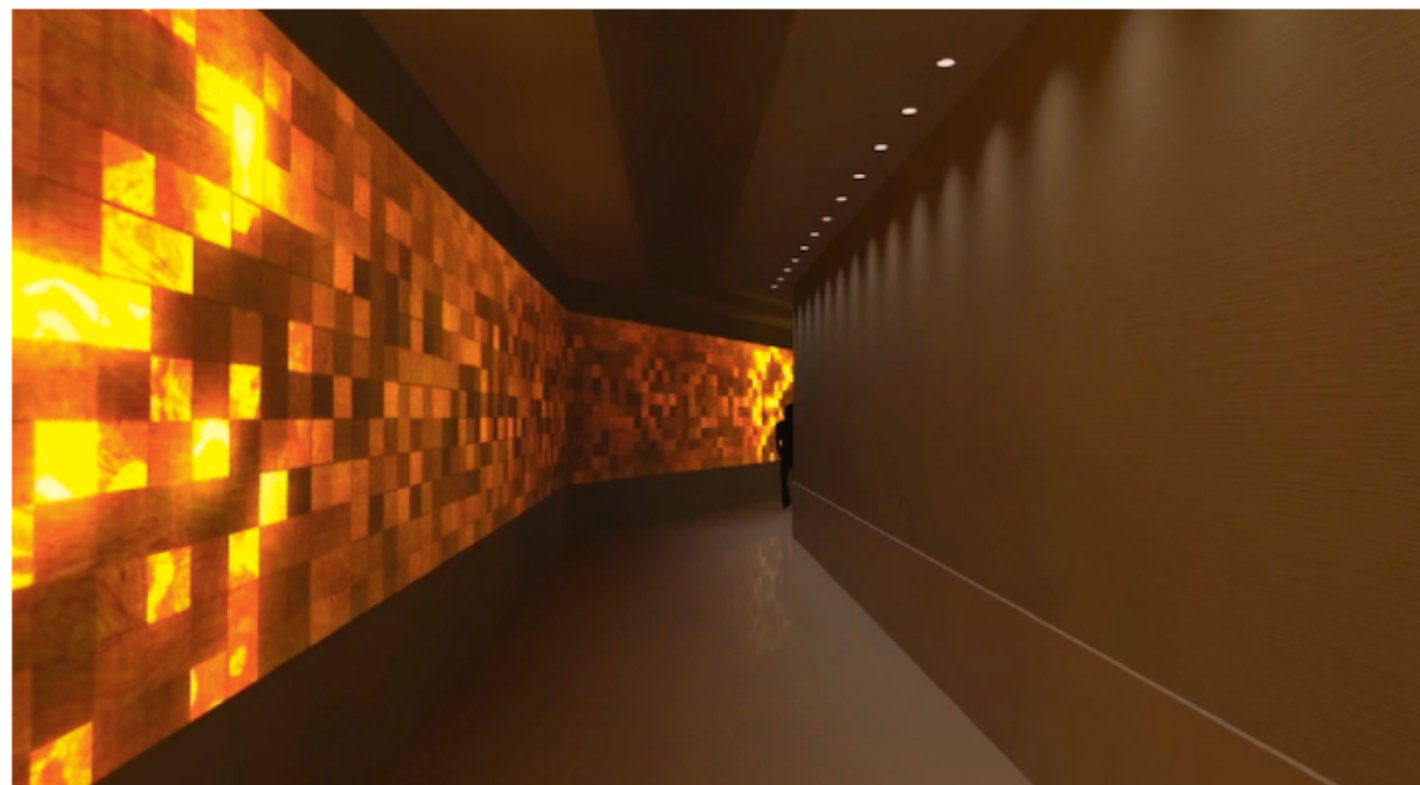
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I write about travel, from jets to hotels, shopping and dining. [FULL BIO](#) ✓

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On March 21, [Renaissance New York Midtown Hotel](#) will open, the brand's 160th property, but more importantly a flagship showcasing what the future holds, sort of. Last week nearly all 250 of the property's employees were on hand for training and a pep session. Executives exalted them to not only provide great service and know the finer points of their job requirements, but to create experiences and memories for customers.

Toni Stoeckl, the vice president who oversees the brand for its owner, Marriott International, calls them "Instagram moments." It's a play on "Kodak Moments," which has some irony. Renaissance, like the once dominant filmmaker, some say, has yet to prove that it has what it takes to survive and thrive in what is an increasingly crowded and changing marketplace.



A wall using ambient intelligence technology reacts to your movements creating a myriad of different images to entertain and intrigue you as you enter the hotel.

Cutting through the clutter is not an easy mission. [Ten groups offer up over 115 brands](#), with over 30 less than 10 years old, and two more launched just since the start of the year. So, if Ritz-Carlton stands for luxury, Westin is the “heavenly bed” and W is hip hotels, what does Renaissance stand for?

Stoeckl says the brand is “fearlessly chic,” focused on travelers who are looking to bring home stories, even from a business trip, are interested in discovering, and want something that is authentic and local. The tag line is “Business Unusual.” A second key target is folks in the neighborhood. He says, that as a brand, Renaissance scores very highly for satisfaction with next generation travelers (read millennials), and he adds, “We don’t want to be something to everyone. We want to be everything for someone.”

Travelers who want to be “in and out” probably won’t notice the details in the art and design that Stoeckl calls “look and look again” experiences. A large wall installation in the reception area of the new hotel, quoting Diane von Furstenberg reads, “Attitude is Everything.” It is a tribute to the hotel’s Garment District location, but a closer inspection reveals that the letters are made up with thousands of sewing pins. Another wall display entering the conference area is made with panels containing thousands of metal collar stays. Opening the door to the closet in your room reveals one of over 50 New York inspired images on the back wall.

Rooms and suites have a mixture of high-low elements, such as faux leather headboards and loungers, carpet and wood exposed floors, juxtaposed with concrete walls. There are stunning views south and north (if you are on the 22nd floor or higher). The hotel’s designer, I.M. Pei disciple Jeffrey Beers (whose credits include The Cove Atlantis, New York’s Dylan Hotel, Fontainebleau Resort in Miami and Hard Rock Riviera Maya as well as Vegas clubs and numerous restaurants), has creatively brought the oft-overused term of “residential feel” to life in the suites filling narrow wall shelves with free standing pictures and drawings by local artists.

Moreover, his attempts to combine form and function work perfectly. For example, the glass bathroom concept that too many times is better suited for *Vogue* and *GQ* models than the typical customer base. In this case, showers look out onto the bedroom, providing users both daylight and depending on the room, stunning views through the bedroom and out onto Gotham. However, the glass is frosted about two-thirds of the way to the ceiling, giving a reasonable level of privacy. Entry level rooms range from 225 sq. ft. to 275 sq. ft. and seem surprisingly spacious. Bathrooms, benefitting from the external light, have a much larger feel.



Renaissance executives are hoping their new flagship will become popular with locals.

The upper lobby area combines a sleek and slimmed down front desk with the social areas (Before the end of the year, guests will be able to check-in using their smartphone which will then serve as their room key). As you get off the elevator, to your right there is a 10 ft. high by 20 ft. wide wall projection featuring constantly changing New York photographs. To the left is an upscale bar, lounge and library area with lots of natural light, using marble and light woods. Furniture includes comfortable, weighty chairs and Ying and Yang couches that encourage socializing without sacrificing aesthetics. There is a communal meeting table. Plentiful power outlets and ports mean you don't have to worry about your batteries running down at the wrong moment. An outdoor terrace overlooks Madison Square Garden. A DJ booth built into shelving that separates the library and lounge area can be hidden during the day, and then opened in the evenings. End of day mixers are a brand signature.

It is a venue that Stoeckl hopes will attract local businesspeople and commuters as a meeting place for a coffee or a drink. While club lounges for loyalty program elite members are typically in a remote area of the hotel, in this case, it is on the opposite side of the lobby. A level below is an expansive 8,000 sq. ft. indoor and outdoor New York outpost of Sunset Strip's [Rock & Reilly's](#), with a glass roof that can be opened or closed.

Nicole Gurkin, a Manhattan attorney who frequently goes through the nastiness and filth that is Penn Station and attends events at past its prime Madison Square Garden, says, “The area really needs something like this. There’s really no place now you want to go before or after a game that’s nearby.” With 650,000 New Yorkers transiting the commuter rail, Amtrak and subway hub daily and up to 20,000 attending events, there is plenty of local traffic to tap into.

If you like what you see here, you will find Renaissance’s recently opened hotel in Montreal, as well as its Paris and Dubai flagships, coming later this year, mostly different. Sister hotels have few common threads, except the **Navigator**, its roaming version of a concierge and the idea of lobby-based evening events. “We don’t have a prototype room,” says Stoeckl.



Be your own concierge with this interactive video wall that helps sort through various attractions based on how far you want to venture and what time of day or night you plan to go.

If that sounds a lot like Autograph Collection, Marriott's entry into uniting unbranded four- and-five star lifestyle hotels, Stoeckl says the difference is clear: While the latter's entries vary widely in style and design and are not location centric, Renaissance is about strong ties to the local neighborhood, "look and look again" moments and a combination of high-low design.

While Renaissance has generated some plaudits for its attempts to remake its image using [music](#) and [art](#) to cultivate new and younger customers, it has yet to win the adoration of travel industry media. Many remember the brand's bumpy history under three ownerships, starting in 1981 as Ramada's upscale offering to complement its roadside hotels. From there the brand was bought by Hong Kong-based New World Group, which then acquired Stouffer Hotels from Nestle and mashed the two together. It wasn't until 1997 that Renaissance ended up in the hands of Marriott, and only about seven years ago it headed on its current approach.

Jason Clampet, Head of Content for influential travel intelligence website [Skift](#), says, "Marriott has been pushing Renaissance as local, authentic, but I don't know anybody who says, 'I wanted to stay at a Renaissance.'"

[Mary Gostelow](#), who writes a monthly newsletter for hotel owners and managers and is a columnist for *Hotels* magazine, asks, "Does anyone other than a Marriott employee or a key loyalty card holder even know that Renaissance exists?"

Stoeckl, who cut his teeth helping grow W Hotels for Starwood Hotels & Resorts, has been leading the effort to reposition Renaissance since 2009. He is nonplussed by the criticism. He points to its numerous current locations and 29 more in the pipeline. However, he acknowledges getting a clear message out is challenging, particularly having to begin with a large group of legacy properties instead of a clean slate. The cycle for hotel renovations is six years for light updates and 10 to 12 years for major overhauls, so not every hotel in the portfolio reflects the brand vision, which makes this opening so critical.

During my visit to the soon to open hotel, an executive with Lore Group, which owns and operates Rock & Riley, let it out the he didn't understand the concept behind Renaissance until the two companies started working together.

In terms of Instagram moments, visitors won't have to wait to get into the hotel proper to start snapping and posting. A floor to ceiling light wall leading to the elevators along the hallway access from Penn Station uses ambient intelligence technology and reacts to your movements, creating a myriad of different images to entertain and intrigue you. There is also an alcove where guests can stand on various spots marked by how far you want to walk, and what time of day you want to go. A video wall in front of you then lights up with various selections curated by Time Out New York. By pointing your hand at your choice on the wall, more details appear.

For Renaissance, connecting with its target market means a non-traditional communications approach focused around content, such as its Time Out partnership, which Stoeckl believes speaks to authenticity and locality. The marketing plan includes working with influential bloggers in fashion to tap into the hotel's fashion district location. For David DiFalco, the General Manager, it means getting outside the hotel and taking a deep dive into the local neighborhood, sitting on local community business boards and creating partnerships with nearby businesses, including the Knicks for events and the Liberty to host visiting opponents.

Stoeckl thinks consumers who come into Renaissance hotels locally will be impressed enough to seek them out when they travel. At the same time, he notes a large portion of the brand's business comes from meetings, so having strong local ties will help drive that revenue.

A 19-minute brand sponsored Youtube movie titled "Business Unusual" using the moniker "Substance Over Hype" posted in January has already generated over seven million views. A positioning statement on the corporate website reads, "At Renaissance Hotels, it's our job to make your trip a little less expected. And a lot more memorable."

For Stoeckl and Marriott, the challenge may be getting you to know enough about what's inside to give it a try, and then getting you to understand the nuances of how each Renaissance is still part of a brand, despite their local orientation and the fact that many don't provide all of the elements of the new flagship.

It also means for the time being, many of the memorable moments will come from whether or not bellboys, maids and bartenders can figure out ways to authentically surprise and delight you into whipping out your smartphone for a quick selfie.