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New Belltown hostel a work of art

By Blythe Lawrence
Special to The Seattle Times

Belltown's old Lorraine hotel is once again ready for its close-up.

In its new role as an international hostel, the three-story hotel, rumored to have been visited by Clark Gable, Jimmy Stewart and other silver-screen stars from the 1920s to the 1960s, greeted its first guests in more than 20 years.

Long ago, the Lorraine had a starring role on Film Row, as Second Avenue was known when it housed the regional film-distribution center for MGM. By 1986, the building was purchased by the Plymouth Housing Group.

Plymouth moved out about two years ago, leaving The Lorraine empty and in need of repair. John Slonecker, president of Seattle real-estate investment group Gibraltar, first saw the building's interior in the fall of 2007. It had been vacant for more than six months.

"It was hard to imagine people living there at any point in its recent history," Slonecker said. "Believe me, the glamour had left long ago."

Amenities

City Hostel Seattle, as the Lorraine is now being called, has some standard-issue hostel amenities, such as metal bed frames and a choice between private and family rooms or dorms for a low price. It's located at 2327 Second Ave.

Less standard is the artwork, done by 47 local artists who painted the walls or created installations in all but four of the hostel's 51 rooms.



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Jeff Jacobson, an artist who uses the name Weirido, puts some finishing touches on his artwork at the newly restored Lorraine Hotel — now called City Hostel Seattle — at 2327 Second Ave., in Belltown.



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Anika Wilson completes work on her art in room 110 at the City Hostel Seattle in Belltown.



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Local artists decorated 47 of the 51 rooms of the hostel.

"We really tried to go with a full spectrum of types of art that reach every area of what Seattle has to offer," said Jen Vertz, who curated the project.

Lee Kindell and Nancy Gambin operate City Hostel Seattle. The idea for the project came from Kindell, who is the sort of person who "if you were to drop like a Big Gulp cup on the floor, you would turn around to pick it up and Lee would have already made it a lampshade," Slonecker said. In City Hostel Seattle, Kindell saw an opportunity to craft something special.

"I hope this is a catalyst to inspire people," Kindell said. "I hope it makes a difference and a little bit of change. We're not just machines trying to make a dollar."

Kindell met Vertz and her partner, Jeff Jacobson, an artist who uses the name Weirdo, while Vertz and Weirdo were painting the Pioneer Square Community Association Mural on the corner of South Washington Street and Occidental Avenue South. Vertz took care of the planning and recruited the artists.

The artists worked for free, realizing that the hostel's clientele will give them a measure of international exposure. Some, balancing full-time jobs with the time it takes to create art, brought sleeping bags and slept on the floor of the rooms they painted.

"It's a win-win situation," said Chris Sheridan, whose delicately crafted paintings feature crows and string and are inspired by Aesop's fables, Grimm's fairy tales and Homer's "Odyssey." "They get a bunch of free art, but we get a way to get our work out to the public."

Rainwater

Each bedroom is wildly different from the next. One shows the Seattle skyline surrounded by what appear to be spray-painted polka dots, the result of reverse ink photo transfers.

Another's walls are milky white with small, whimsical patches of blue, which gives the impression of being inside a cloud. Inside another, gnomes resting on mushrooms smoke from a hookah.

Having up-and-coming artists paint the rooms is just one of Kindell's ideas for City Hostel Seattle. Other plans include a rainwater-collection system. And a wall on the outside of the hotel will be turned over to artists to craft an art insect to be placed near a sign that says "Infestation." The insect idea was inspired by the gum wall in Post Alley at Pike Place Market, Kindell said.

The lobby will become an art gallery for young artists, including those who painted rooms inside the hostel.

A stay at City Hostel Seattle runs between \$33 and \$95 a night, depending on the room. Slonecker, whose company paid \$3.1 million to buy the building and another \$750,000 to remodel it, said he believes the art



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Artist "Ego" puts the finishing touches on his artwork at the City Hostel Seattle in Belltown.



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES
The newly restored Lorraine Hotel at 2327 Second Ave. in Belltown is about to re-open as a youth hostel.

adds value and marketability to the property.

The hostel's Aug. 14 opening attracted so much attention that Kindell said all rooms will be available to be toured during Belltown's Second Friday Artwalk from 6-9 p.m. on Sept. 11.

Inside the hostel are touches of the old Lorraine. Kindell restored the hotel lobby's original terrazzo floor and bookshelves have been crafted from recycled mailboxes, he said.

"This hotel kind of reminds me of the life of Mickey Rourke," Slonecker said. "You have this tough in-between time and now you're back on top again. It's kind of great to give this building back its dignity."

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