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A CANOPY LINED with tongue-and-groove white oak reaches out from Hotel Vermont's reception area to greet the public. At the front corner of the building, a two-story section housing public spaces has wraparound windows that offer views of Lake Champlain and the Adirondack Mountains.

ARCHITECTURE
SMITH BUCKLEY
ARCHITECTS
INTERIOR DESIGN
TRUEXCULLINS



Filling a Niche

From impossible lot to thriving hub, Hotel Vermont is a triumph of creative vision and design

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The sleek, independently owned 124-room hotel on Cherry Street in Burlington, Vermont, may not evoke nostalgic images of the Green Mountain State, but it embodies Vermont's most defining values: community, conservation, and a strong sense of place — from the dynamic and playful forms fused into an irregular and highly constrained space to the bits of shells from Lake Champlain's shores embedded into the lobby's polished concrete floor.

Hotel Vermont started with an infill lot so tough, it had been

written off by developers for years. An adjacent parking garage meant most of the property along the street was just 45 feet deep. Garage entrances would have to be maintained and spanned, existing storm-water pipes accommodated, and footings shared with a neighboring hotel. And there were complicated changes in grade. "Friends would say, 'I drove by your hotel site, but I couldn't figure out where you could put the hotel,'" recalls Israel Smith of Smith Buckley Architects, the Burlington firm that finally tackled the design challenge. "It took a lot of I-think-I-can for everyone on the team, including the

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owners.” But the site had a partial view of Lake Champlain and the Adirondack Mountains and was strategically located halfway between the popular pedestrian Church Street Marketplace and the recreationally vibrant Burlington waterfront. Smith and his partner, Cleary Buckley, were excited by the vision of a project that could fill a hole downtown with new life instead of developing valuable open space outside the city.

Because it was difficult to obtain funding in post-recession 2010–2011, the design team, including local owners Chuck Deslauriers, Jay Canning, and Jack Wallace, who also own the Courtyard Burlington Harbor hotel next door, had a whole year to reflect on what the unique identity of this hotel would be. “Part of the process the owners went through was opening their arms wide to the Vermont products community,” Smith says. The idea was to infuse the hotel with all things local — natural materials, craftsmanship, and hospitality-related products, as well as food and drink — and support area businesses.

Meanwhile, the architects sorted out tricky structural puzzles. They created common rooms in the corner of the

THE RHYTHMIC PLAY of color, texture, and form breaks up the long frontage of the hotel (LEFT). Warming the bar and lobby spaces (FACING PAGE) are materials shaped by local craftsmen. Chairs with legs inspired by sleigh runners are by Beeken Parsons of Shelburne, Vermont. Projectors hidden in the ceiling throw a pattern of light on the wall that resembles dappled sunshine.



building offering views to the lake and stepped up the bar and kitchen to accommodate the garage ramp underneath. They created a 1,200-square-foot terrace with firepit just outside the cafe and lounge, and a 2,000-square-foot “green roof” that serves as a breakout space for the meeting rooms on the second floor.

The 45-foot dimension of the structure made a typical corridor of guest rooms impossible. So Smith and Buckley picked up on a novel idea suggested by the owners: square rooms with split baths. The entrance to each room is flanked by a toilet/sink space on one side and a shower/sink space on the other. Sliding doors made of

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BLACK GRANITE ENCASES the elevators (TOP) on the ground floor, where sap buckets are filled with greens. Parallel horizontal and skewed vertical cuts in slabs of varying thicknesses suggest the rock faces of a quarry. Translucent sliding doors define the shower area of a guest room (ABOVE). The bed is highlighted by a tall headboard of solid white oak.

translucent acrylic, which allows natural light to penetrate, close these areas off for privacy or open them to the room for a more spacious feel.

The ground floor of the hotel presented special design challenges because of the building's irregular shape and grade changes. Smith and Buckley conceived the lobby, library, lounge, and restaurants as a series of overlapping spaces that flow around the bedrock of the elevator core, where walls are sheathed in black granite reminiscent of nearby quarries.

Elevators smack in the middle of the lobby "could have been an eyesore," says

interior designer Kim Deetjen of Truex-Cullins, also in Burlington. Instead, they became a striking design feature. "It's a beautiful, sculptural backdrop that everything wraps around," she says.

Deetjen arranged these public spaces to make the most of the hotel's oblique view of the lake. "We made sure nothing got in the way of that," she says. "Instead, we framed it and strategically choreographed it. Everything had to fulfill high criteria. It had to be made in Vermont, it had to involve craft in the way it was fabricated or installed, and it had to be artfully interpreted." Her vision for the interior was one of quality, creativity, naturalness, and realism. "Nothing is trying to look like something it isn't," she says.

One of Deetjen's favorite features is the lighting near the fireplace. Projection fixtures, hidden between Douglas fir joists in the ceiling, throw a pattern of light on the wall that resembles dappled sunshine on a forest floor and decreases in intensity from morning to evening.

The overall effect is as warm, alive, and grounding as Vermont itself. "Guests ask, 'Who owns this place? What franchise is it?'" says front office manager Tim Weaver. "And the locals have really jumped onboard." Besides frequenting Juniper, the hotel's bar and restaurant, which young professionals prefer over those that cater to college students, locals throng to Hen of the Wood, a restaurant that leases space in another corner of the building, and they use the hotel's meeting rooms and attend special art, music, and community events hosted by Hotel Vermont. For hotel guests, there are bicycles or snowshoes available for exploring the waterfront bike paths.

"Green" in many ways, the hotel is 30 percent better insulated than required by code. But Buckley notes the project's Silver certification by the US Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design program doesn't tell the

whole story. "The hotel is a real contributor to the character of Cherry Street," he says. "It has increased foot traffic in the area and plays

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a key role in the city's goal of connecting the Church Street Marketplace with the waterfront. That's one of the most successful aspects of the project." ■