



Hotel Art Reimagined

Hillsborough Street Hotel Designed with an Emphasis on Local History and Talent

By Karlie Justus Marlowe, Photography by Davies Photography

A framed picture of the beloved Sadlack's Heroes hangs framed near the Aloft Raleigh check-in desk, a quiet tribute to the sandwich shop's original Hillsborough Street location amidst the



boutique hotel's colorful energy.

Aloft, an international chain that caters mostly to young urban travelers with an eye toward funky, contemporary design, opened its first Raleigh outpost in October 2015 near the Pullen Road roundabout where Sadlack's used to stand. The new addition is part of the first phase of the city's Hillsborough Street redesign project, one that's required a little give and take when it comes to replacing aging institutions in favor of economic renewal.

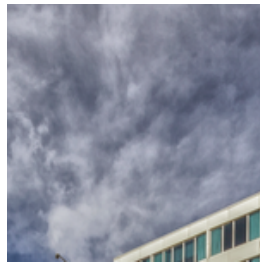
"I used to play rock and roll in Sadlacks," said Raleigh-based artist and architect Thomas Sayre, who worked closely with the project's developers from the start to integrate local touches. "But I could tell this team wanted to do it right – not just with talk, but with money and effort."

The building's developers, a partnership of Raleigh's Bell View Founders and The Bernstein Companies of Washington, DC, put an emphasis on incorporating the corridor's history and neighbors, with an eye toward the future as well. The stretch of street has always been a historic gateway into Raleigh, as the doorstep to NC State University and Meredith College and the entry to downtown and its capital complex.

"The local developers have been here for quite some time, and when it came to replacing Sadlack's they really wanted it to be local instead of just being another franchise," said Edie Deck, director of sales and marketing at the hotel's Hillsborough Street location. "The money they spent and the thought they put in early on is very different for a hotel."

Sayre echoes the team's commitment to using art to propagate urban design thinking, which sets the location apart as a gateway to the city center.

"These guys courageously did that, and listened to a flaky



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artist on how to make it happen,” Sayre said with a laugh.

Jeff Murison, the executive director of the Hillsborough Street Community Service Corporation, recognizes the building as an anchor for a redevelopment project 15 years in the making.

“The addition of Aloft is deeply transformative for the road,” said Murison. “Not just in how people use the street since it’s a destination boutique hotel, but also how people see and feel about the street. It has a wide array of artistic elements built in, and in the nature of the Aloft brand, it’s a bit of art itself.”

Overtones

Of all those artistic elements, the most eye-catching is the 51-foot metallic sculpture that hangs over the hotel entry. Its gleaming rings were created by Sayre, who also installed the convention center’s shimmer wall and the Gyre rings on the North Carolina Museum of Art’s nearby campus.

Sitting directly across from NC State’s iconic Memorial Belltower, Overtones is a visible representation of the physics of a ringing bell and the round, oval and triangular shapes those sound waves create.

“It sits across from a belltower that’s never had a bell in it,” said Sayre, referring to the speakers and sound system now used to play chimes from the top of the tower. “There’s also some humor in that.”

Inside, the glass staircase that connects the street entry with the second-floor bar and lounge allows for an unobstructed view of the Belltower, so the sculpture and its inspiration can be seen from any vantage point.

“The sculpture catches the sun as it arcs across the street in an ever-changing display of reflections,” said Sayre, who fashioned it out of both brushed and mirrored metal.

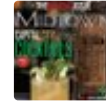
Street facade

Sayre’s input extends to the entire streetscape, which aims to marry the thoroughfare’s eastern and western outposts.

“NC State’s history is presented in brick details, while the sleeker metal and glass represents its future,” said Sayre. “The school is increasingly finding itself as a nationally and

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internationally first-rate technology-based university.”

Behind Overtones, a concrete wall slices through the middle of the two brick and glass sections, cast out of molds of Piedmont clay meant to mirror the area’s agricultural fields, trees and rivers from a bird’s eye view. Brick pavers along the front also pay homage to each of the colleges on the Wolfpack campus, designed by a landscape architect from the university.

“It’s a thoughtful new structure that serves as a landmark and anchor, while also blending into the nature of the community,” said Murison.

Rotating art gallery

Inside, the hotel works with neighbor Roundabout Art Collective to curate a rotating gallery of art for sale to guests. Big canvases of abstract art line the walls of the first and second-floor lobbies, all made by local creatives and featured in an effort to set Aloft apart.

“I once spent six months living in a hotel, and you realize that all hotels do the same thing. You sleep there, you shower there,” said Deck, a veteran business traveler. “It’s really all the other things that we can do to set us apart that’s important. We want to be more than just a place to sleep.”

That focus on local from a corporate hotel falls in line with the Hillsborough Street Community Service Corporation’s goals.

“We remain a local street that runs along the state’s land-grant university and a well-established residential neighborhood,” said Murison. “The vast majority of our businesses are mom and pop shops and we celebrate local. We have hundreds of millions of dollars of investment being used in a local way.”

Art hub anchor

The list of Aloft’s artistic neighbors doesn’t end with Roundabout. In fact, a small but powerful design faction has emerged between neighbors Raleigh Little Theatre, NC State’s Gregg Museum of Art & Design, the Pullen Arts Center and Theatre In the Park.

“That area has become an art hub,” notes Murison. “It’s an artistic center for the city.”

Sayre points out that while there are several pockets of art-centric districts around the city, this is a rare example of one created with private money.

“A private developer putting a serious stake in the ground to create not just any gateway, but an art gateway?” he said. “It’s very unusual.”

In the coming months, Aloft aims to direct its guests out to its neighbors with a bike share program.

“We want people to explore our community,” said Deck.

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