

RISE



PHOTOS BY RICHARD NISMAN

Element 315 is poised to become a downtown gathering place.

PUTTIN' ON THE ... HILTON

For those of us who live here, the newly refurbished downtown hotel is a destination with a lot to offer. By Sujata Srinivasan

Borscht and baked knishes entwine with the aroma of Shanghai bok choy with shiitake and garlic. Jazzed up cocktails ebb joyously alongside frothy Starbucks cappuccinos, while fortune cookies could gift you with free parking for a day! Something zany's cooking up at the end of Hartford's Trumbull Street. You've seen it as you've driven by or perhaps you've already stepped into the new Hilton Hartford, a 33-year-old ugly duckling transformed into a swan after a nearly yearlong makeover. But this one took more than a swish of fairytale magic.

"This is not a renovation, it's a rejuvenation. We've really had to redo the whole guts of building," says Len Wolman, chairman and CEO of Waterford Group LLC, which will manage the now AAA Four diamond facility that reopened in March. Previously owned by MeriStar Hospitality, the hotel was, simply put, uninspiring. "Awful beyond belief!" lamented a TripAdvisor member from San Francisco on the TripAdvisor website in August 2003. "Hartford is a beautiful town with lots of historic sights, but don't stay at the Hilton. It is run-down and poorly managed."

Well, that was then. Now, after new owners 315 Trumbull Street Associates LLC pumped in \$33 million (cost of acquisition and renovation), there's nothing run-down about this place anymore. But there's more at work here than just money. The hotel is clearly a part of Hartford's revitalization, Wolman feels. "While it's important to see the amount of money being spent

on bricks and mortar, I think the other more important part is how people are working together to create a legacy for the city in the future," he says.

A hefty part of that legacy might well spring from Trumbull Street. At the corner of Trumbull and Asylum, Northland Investment's Corp.'s \$155 million Town Square, complete with luxury apartments and street-side retail shops, continues to rise day by day. South of the Town Square, the elegant 55 On The Park has already become an address. Across the street, Trumbull on the Park LLC's \$38 million Trumbull Center with residences and retail is poised to open shortly.

Hilton has no plans to ignore its current and potential downtown clientele. "We are offering local residents a downtown meeting place before going to the Civic Center, The Bushnell, and Hartford Stage, or a meeting place after work," says Russell Abell, general manager of the Hilton Hartford. The hotel's restaurant and bar, he feels, is the perfect spot.

Morty and Ming's, the lobby-level restaurant with a street-side glass façade and an exterior entrance with a portecochere to drive under, is also a meeting place for Chinatown and New York deli. Avid foodies could pick between Jewish ethnic specialties such as lox, whiting and cured meats, or succulent Cantonese and Szechwan wok-prepared chicken with broccoli. But if you're just stopping by for a quick lunch from work or simply don't have the time for a leisurely four-course meal, no problem. You can get a hamburger instead. The recipes were developed from scratch by Hilton chefs led by Steve Rossen, a restaurateur plucked from the Boston area. "When you take everything else away, it's the food. If you can't master the center of the plate, who cares about the music and ambience?" asks Abell.

Hop over from Morty & Ming's to Element 315, an upscale lobby bar with soft seating around a fireplace and bookcases (in case you're in the mood to read), or by the window looking out onto Trumbull. Or if you prefer, you can get a private den with your own ice rail to keep your drink cold. "This place is going to become the most talked about space in Hartford. Who was seen last night at Element 315?" says Terrence D. Bickhardt, president of operations and marketing for the Waterford Hotel Group, a subsidiary of Waterford Group. Adds Abell, "If I was working at, say, the Lincoln Financial and wanted to meet my wife somewhere for a cocktail before going to The Bushnell, I'd say 'Honey, let's meet at 315.'"

The 22 story, 392-room facility, connected to the Civic Center via a skywalk, kicked off in March as the official hotel for the Big East basketball championship at the Civic Center. Its two ballrooms hosted two weddings and a bar mitzvah. "Our catering and meeting space has bookings for the next six months for a number of association and social meetings. We've booked holiday parties for November and December and are also working every day with every service that a bride and groom and their parents want in organizing their weddings," says Abell. Hilton's director of catering, Jill Fahey, works with them on space and also refers them to businesses like limousine companies.



If a wedding, bar or bat mitzvah or party is not on your planner, Hilton's BounceBack Weekend and Romance Package are designed for out-of-town and in-state guests. Bounce Back is for commercial travelers whose stay gets them discounts on weekends. "Even if they are living in, say, Mystic, they might say, 'Let's go up Saturday night to Hartford, stay at the Hilton, relax, have dinner, go to The Bushnell, and after a Sunday breakfast, visit The Mark Twain House,'" Abell says. Meanwhile, the Romance Package, as the name implies, is just that. "You might be celebrating your 20th or even second wedding anniversary," he says.

Guests of the hotel stay in light and cream-colored rooms with framed prints of the city's landmarks by Hartford artists John McCormack and Jane Zisk. They get to luxuriate in a whirlpool and spa and have access to a health facility and pool. For those who simply want to stay in and laze about, rooms have flat-screen televisions. Says Bickhardt, "We now have a gateway destination for someone in the area to come into the city to a hotel that is comparable to the type of center city hotel in New York, Chicago or Los Angeles."

Okay. So the hotel's up and ready to party. Isn't it time for Hartford to follow suit? 🍷

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Morty & Ming's is an unusual combination of Jewish deli and Chinese.

