

RISE

HARTFORD'S NEW DESTINATION HOTEL

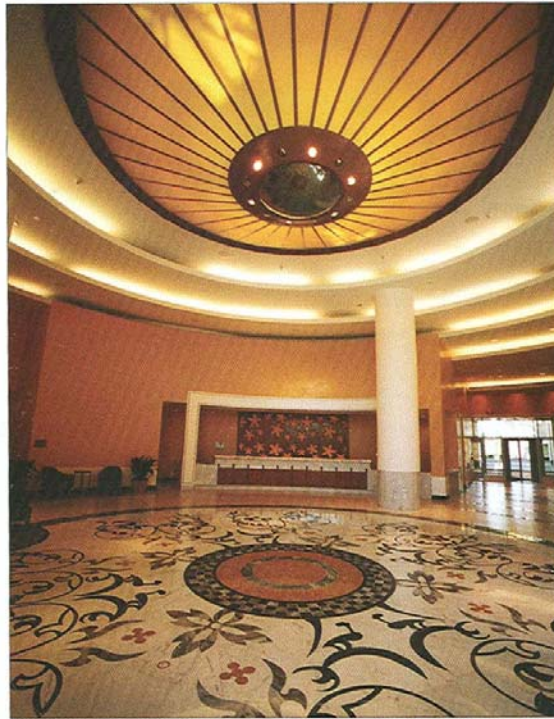
The Marriott Hartford Downtown isn't just for out-of-town conventioners. Those of us who live here will find it has plenty to offer. By Sujata Srinivasan

Twenty-two stories of elegance and sheer luxury complement the picturesque Hartford skyline, a flatteringly lean and tall visual montage looming over the rippling Connecticut River. You've seen it rise, floor by floor beside the 550,000-square-foot Connecticut Convention Center, as you enter Hartford from the Founders Bridge. The view is no less appealing from down below on busy Columbus Boulevard, where a massive limestone pavilion opens into a lobby that is a visual symphony of color, texture and symmetry.

Once inside the lobby, the eye rests upon a confluence of enormously satisfying visual treats such as a delicately woven black lace-inspired mosaic floor, or a gigantic inverted glass dome diffusing soft light from above. Classic silhouette and lace patterns punctuate the stylish columns and carpets, which are reminiscent of neo-Victorian, 19th century art.

It's no wonder that the interior is breathtaking. The celebrated firm of Alexandra Champalimaud and Associates of New York, which designed the legendary Algonquin Hotel, designed the Marriott Hartford Downtown's interior. Massive and cozy. Classic and modern. That's pretty much how the rest of the hotel is for those of you who've managed to resist dropping by after it opened in August.

Looking for fun? Try Crush, a feisty, 1,500-square-foot high-energy bar of blue, wood and cream, "nothing like what's in Hartford today, but exists in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and London. Exciting drinks and great music," promises Len Wolman, chairman and CEO of Waterford Group LLC, which manages the convention center's \$81 million anchor hotel. But Wolman is quick to point out that the Marriott Hartford Downtown will be more than a host hotel to the convention center, to which it is connected both at the lobby level and on the terrace.



A breathtaking lobby hints at the elegance inside the new Marriott Hartford Downtown.

"We are a downtown destination and expect 50 percent of our business for the restaurant, café and bar to come from the local community." In fact, the Hilton Hartford on Trumbull Street, also managed by the Waterford Group, continues to post upward marching figures in drop-ins since it reopened this March after a massive renovation. "We've been very happy with the pace at Hilton. Folks that work downtown drop by for lunch and to Element 315 in the evenings. Hilton has already become a part of the downtown life," says Wolman.

And that's exactly what he expects is in store for the Marriott, although he admits the Marriott is more pricy. "We're going to be the market leader. So our prices will be the benchmark, it'll be at a premium," he says.

And don't forget Vivo, the 4,800-square-foot, 180-seat Tuscan-style Italian restaurant with a 25-foot vaulted ceiling, Marmorino plastered walls, built-in wine bar and a Milano market expo kitchen. Vivo showcases classic Italian dishes with a contemporary American touch, such as warm artichoke hearts with fresh mint, garlic and olive oil, brick oven grissini with prosciutto, tomato and arugula, wood-oven prawns with green olives, fennel,

and orange, all prepared by chef Sean Dutson and his team. The menu will change with the seasons and include innovative creations by Dutson, who was whisked away from the Mystic Marriott, his former workplace.

A 1,300-square-foot Starbucks café encompasses the corridor that connects the lobby with the Connecticut Convention Center. The café's seating overflows to the lobby lounge and offers high-speed Internet connections for hotel guests and us local drop-ins. There's even a lobby level UPS Store that provides business center services for guests of the hotel and the adjoining convention center.

Now, if you're in the mood for some serious pampering, head to GLO, a spa on the rooftop with stunning views of Hartford. There, nestle into one of the three treatment rooms, indulge in a massage, followed by a dip in the Jacuzzi. Or if you prefer, head out to the 960-square-foot fitness center for a cardio and resistance workout, or dive into the 16-by-40-foot indoor heated pool. "For hotel guests and locals alike, each of these places is a destination," Wolman notes.

"Think about wintertime, when folks in Avon or Farmington get cabin fever. We want them to come and check out our spa and heated pool," says Mark Fallon, the hotel's general manager. In fact, local residents have already

booked the over 8,500-square-foot Connecticut Ballroom, Hartford's largest hotel ballroom, as well as the three smaller conference rooms. There was already a wedding and a fundraising gala for the Greater Hartford Arts Council in September, and there are several office parties scheduled from November through January.

Out of the 409 guest rooms including eight luxury suites and 18 concierge level VIP rooms, 200 face the river. All rooms have dual-line telephones, data ports, voice mail and high-speed Internet access, among other amenities. Fallon believes that you don't have to come from out of state to stay at the hotel. People from Mystic or Essex, for example, planning to spend a weekend in the city, have several packages to choose from. The Weekend Family Fun Package priced at \$264 to \$284, includes a one-night stay




Vivo, the Marriott's 180-seat Italian restaurant brings a bit of Tuscany to Hartford.

with two connecting rooms, breakfast for two adults and two children, tickets to local attractions, and an in-room movie. The Get Going Package comes with a deluxe room, breakfast for two, and signature treatment of choice at the spa, all for between \$209 and \$269. Meanwhile, the Hartford Culture Package from \$219 to \$249 consists of a deluxe room, dinner for two at Vivo, breakfast for two, and tickets to

local attractions such as the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art and the Mark Twain House & Museum. The Romance Package comprises a deluxe room with room service breakfast for two, and champagne and strawberries, for \$149 to \$179.

Soon surrounding the hotel will be a labyrinth of upscale retail stores, nestled amidst historic Hartford destinations and cultural attractions such as theatre, art and museums. And the Connecticut Center for Science and Exploration is

scheduled to break ground next door in the coming months.

Sure, it's nowhere close to Broadway or Fifth Avenue. But guess what? Something good is happening here and it's only getting better. 

Sujata Srinivasan is a Manchester-based freelance journalist and senior editor of an equity research group. Her most recent article for Hartford Magazine, "Fighting for Colt," appeared in May.