

# Hotel Syracuse, Lights Up Again

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photo by: Marriott Syracuse Downtown  
The Hotel Syracuse opened its doors in 1924.

The [Hotel Syracuse](#) had been vacant for 12 years, but as far as developer and Syracuse native Ed Riley was concerned, that was all the more reason to try to save it.

Built in 1924 and designed by William Stone Post of renowned New York architectural firm George B. Post and Sons, the Hotel Syracuse was once the pride of the city's downtown. Boasting over 600 guest rooms; an elegant Grand Ballroom; and rooftop tennis, squash, and handball courts, it was an unrivaled city landmark for almost 90 years. Its grandeur justified visits from Elvis, President John F. Kennedy, and John Lennon. After a long fight to continue pulling in enough patrons to stay financially afloat, however, the hotel went bankrupt and closed its doors in 2004.

In Riley's previous role as a senior vice president at the Pyramid Hotel Group in Boston, he restored struggling properties that needed the real estate equivalent of CPR. He felt strongly enough about the Hotel Syracuse project to step down from his job at Pyramid, setting up a new company to take title to the hotel. A 40-year veteran of the design, construction, real estate development, and hotel

operations industries, Riley purchased the hotel in July of 2014 after the city seized it through eminent domain.

“I’m from Syracuse, and like a lot of folks, I watched a lot of memories go away when the building closed,” Riley says. “It became a dark hole in downtown.” Riley has memories of going to his first wedding there, and, he jokes, getting thrown out “many times” on St. Patrick’s Day.

“I didn’t really think that it was all that difficult to execute the project,” he continues. “It was a matter of rolling up your sleeves and really spending the time to dig into the various parts and pieces, and to assemble the right team. And that’s what we did.”

When Riley purchased the hotel, the water and steam pipes were broken, and the majority of the electrical and air-handling equipment dated from 1924. Distinctive elements, like a 40-by-6-foot mural behind the front desk illustrating key events from the first 100 years of Syracuse’s history, had been covered with mirrors, and the colorful original paint scheme had been muted down to tones of white and gold. Stately interior spaces like the lobby, Persian Terrace, and Grand Ballroom were restored to their original appearance and color palettes, with architect Bruce King and his team removing historically incompatible additions and alterations that had been made by previous owners over the years.

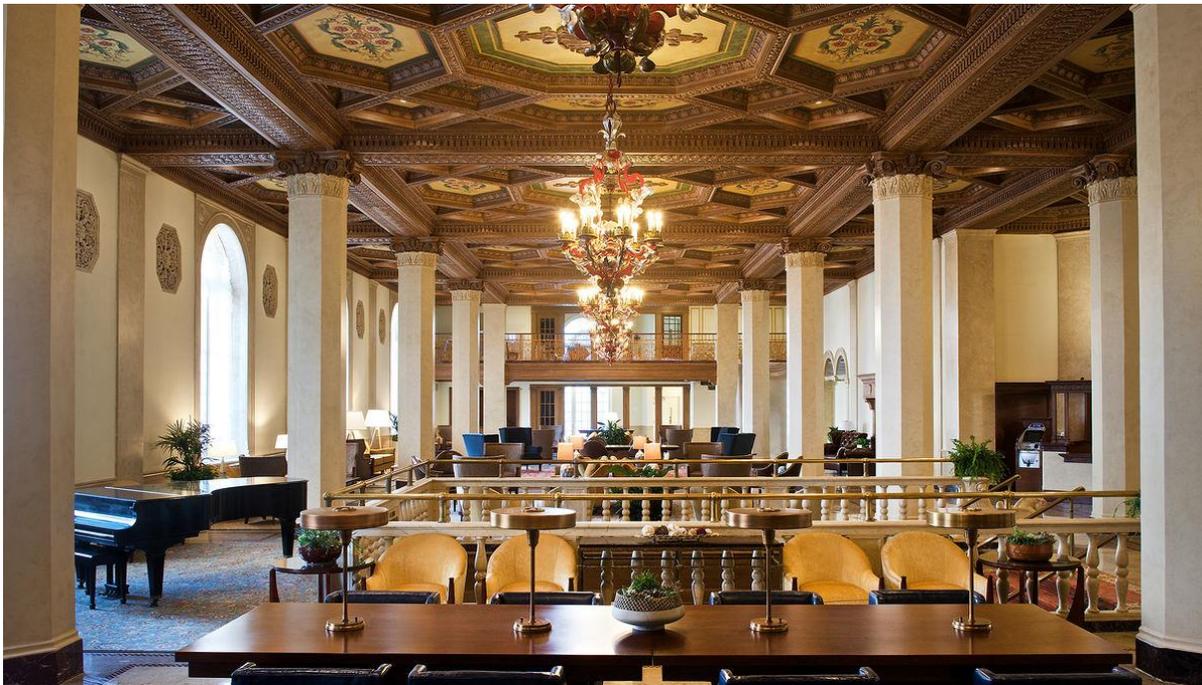


photo by: Marriott Syracuse Downtown

The lobby of the Hotel Syracuse was meticulously restored to its 1924 appearance.

King also executed restoration work on the building's exterior, repairing damaged masonry and replacing the original marble cladding on the building's street-level retail spaces.

Through a mixture of grants from the state and county, rehabilitation tax credits, conventional financing, and a franchise agreement with Marriott, Riley was able to finance the \$82 million restoration, and the hotel reopened in July of 2016 as the Marriott Syracuse Downtown. It's also a member of [Historic Hotels of America](#).

Riley is perhaps most proud of the fact that 60 percent of the hotel's employees come from the low-income neighborhoods surrounding Syracuse's downtown.

"Our GSS scores [Guest Satisfaction Score] speak for themselves in terms of how the guests are treated and the level of service that they're given," he says.

After being open for a little over a year, the hotel is once again being given the chance to be at the center of Syracuse's social and economic life. It has hosted over 120 weddings since last July, and its occupancy has been consistently high, despite being located in a small market upstate.

"When you have a property that's been closed for almost 15 years, you've lost a generation, and you wonder if that generation's going to come back to the property and support it like the previous generations had," he says. "But so far, that hasn't been a problem at all."



Katherine Flynn is an assistant editor at Preservation magazine. She enjoys coffee, record stores, and uncovering the stories behind historic places.