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THIS BRUTAL WORLD  
ATLAS OF BRUTALIST  
ARCHITECTURE

## FEATURES

**On the cover**

In a place so defined by politics, Yours Truly D.C. is an independent: The interior of this DuPont Circle hotel, with its Brutalist tendencies, acquired a distinct boho vibe that harkens to the area's counterculture history. Designer Lisa Simeone's brief: Create a place that speaks directly to guests. That conversation started when the hotel launched in May 2020.

## DEPARTMENTS

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SPECIAL REPORT: OPERATIONS  
**THE GREAT RESET**

Parallel to the anticipated revival of travel as the COVID threat recedes is a challenge for hotels: how to re-integrate, retrain and remotivate their most important asset. Changing times require new skills - not just for the employees who have worked through the pandemic, are returning after furloughs or are new to their jobs, but the managers who have to juggle reduced staff and guests whose needs are more specialized or acute than ever. Here are three stories on what to expect and how to be the right leader for right now.





DESIGN

# COUNTER-COUTURE





Furnishings complement the Brutalist-style building with a bohemian touch.

**YOURS TRULY D.C. IS A GATHERING SPOT WITH BRUTALISM, BOHO VIBES.**

# URE

Contributed by **ALICIA SHEBER**

**At a time when** the atmosphere of Washington, D.C., is so politically charged, along comes the free-spirited Yours Truly D.C. to further shake up the status quo.

Global developer Brookfield Properties appointed Chicago-based Simeone Deary Design Group (SDDG) to create the interior design and branding for this independent hotel, and in the process transform a 1971 property with Brutalist tendencies into a vibrant hotspot in the Dupont Circle neighborhood.

The resulting “bohemian” design draws inspiration from the 1970s when the area was a hub for nonconformists in the counterculture movement. That legacy still shapes the community’s spirit today, says General Manager Kristofer Carlson, who runs Yours Truly D.C. for operator Aimbridge Hospitality. He lives close to the property and was GM of the site’s previous occupant, Wink Hotel.

Carlson’s insights into the local dynamics were particularly trusted since he and Lisa Simeone, co-founder of SDDG, previously collaborated on The Westin Austin Downtown when he was its general manager.

“Brookfield is a tough taskmaster when it comes to schedules, and it was not an easy construction process,” Simeone says. The team was given one year to gut the 207,478-square-foot property’s interiors and complete the new installation, all while Wink remained partially open.

But COVID-19 derailed the best-laid plans. Meant to open April 2020, Carlson says the team opted instead for a phased opening with greater time to perfect each service. Yours Truly D.C. officially launched May 11.

“We used that month to make sure the brand was ingrained in everyone,” says Carlson. “It was really organic, and we weren’t under the gun to be worried about occupancy, ADR and financials like usually



happens when opening a hotel.” On June 11, the café made its debut; on July 11, a sit-down brunch was introduced; the bar and bar snacks launched mid-August; and in November the full dinner experience became available. Carlson says the unfolding chapters revealed a better way to correctly open a hotel, extend its publicity period and look after team members’ wellbeing as brand ambassadors – all factors that fueled Yours Truly D.C.’s rise to TripAdvisor’s fifth-best hotel in D.C.

**GATHERING PLACE**

According to Simeone, the brief from Shai Zelering, managing director, real estate, Brookfield Properties, was to create a place that speaks directly to guests, almost a gathering place first before a hotel. Her research showed that the brand messages shown on other Dupont Circle hotels’ websites didn’t match customers’ feedback on social media, and no properties had such a multifaceted identity that they were also a magnet for locals. SDDG needed to create that missing hub.

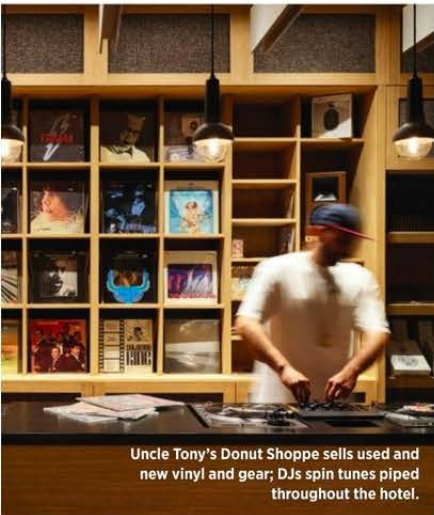
Other hotels “were so busy deciding who they wanted to be that they weren’t listening to their guests,” says Simeone. “We had an opportunity to create ever-changing, serendipitous experiences with retail, a coffee shop, a cool chef, a great cocktail program and DJ jam sessions so that people really don’t want to leave. But unless we had buy-in from the developer, the operator, the GM and the staff, it would fall flat.” Fortunately, they did – particularly since all employees from the Wink, except for F&B, stayed on board for the new hotel. Whether “Yours Truly” or “Truly, Yours” – the official sign-off for correspondence – the branding not only answers Zelering’s vision, it reflects the management’s philosophy of giving team members the freedom to care for guests in their own unique ways. The result is customer service born from employees’ sense that the hotel is truly theirs as well.







The bar at Mercy Me



Uncle Tony's Donut Shoppe sells used and new vinyl and gear; DJs spin tunes piped throughout the hotel.



Someone says the hotel's former layout was compartmentalized, with check-in to the right; stairs down to windowless meeting rooms; a bar along the front facade with a separate small coffee shop at the corner; and a three-meal restaurant in the back, also enclosed without natural daylight. But demolition revealed boarded-up windows that overlooked a raised roof spanning the back of the building. Deemed structurally solid, it enabled the creation of an outdoor porch accessed via meandering terraced platforms with seating.

This discovery led Brookfield to rethink the three-meal concept, opting instead for casual food served on the patio, throughout the open-plan lobby known as "the living room," and in meeting rooms that double as private dining with an open kitchen. Celebrated local restaurateurs and bartenders were brought in for the new venue Mercy Me with its "sorta South American" repertoire. All food is prepped from the lobby's central island, where cocktails and coffee are also served.

#### GOING WITH THE FLOW

Simeone explains the furniture is "more than 95%" bespoke, with each piece customized to go with the boho flow, yet also fit for purpose. For example, mohair

is flame-treated; shag rugs are of a height that keeps the pile from being caught in the carpet roller; and chair stretchers concealed within frames make pieces appear residential, not commercial.

The living room also holds the first D.C. outpost of Orlando, Florida-based record store Uncle Tony's Donut Shoppe, where guests can buy used and new vinyl and gear while DJs spin tunes piped throughout the hotel. SDDG set the stage for impromptu "moments of magic" such as musical instruments placed throughout the lobby to inspire people to play guitar, piano or sing for an improvised jam session. "These fleeting occasions create memories that resonate," Simeone says. "With social media the vehicle and experiences the currency, guests want to tell others about these moments and then come back to try to recapture them."

In the 355 guest rooms, existing concrete floors were polished and softened with boho-style area rugs, while deconstructed closets, crisp white walls and green foliage mix Brutalist and boho vibes.

Everyone is welcome at Yours Truly D.C., including people with diverse political views and even pets — Carlson's dogs Charlotte and Cranberry accompany him daily. It's only fitting in a hotel designed for free-thinking bohemians.