

Modern *Throwback*



The Catahoula Hotel, a new boutique hotel in New Orleans' CBD with historic bones and stylish modern amenities, was made possible in part thanks to a Preservation Easement Donation to the Preservation Resource Center.

BY Danielle Del Sol • PHOTOS BY Liz Jurey

THE BUILDINGS are amazing survivors: Two 19th-century townhouses that now have been reborn as the new Catahoula Hotel in New Orleans' Central Business District avoided being demolished at least twice.

An onslaught of demolitions in the 1960s and 1970s saw many of the low-rise buildings that once populated the area razed to create the neighborhood of skyscrapers we know today as the Poydras Street corridor. But these two buildings, tucked away on Union Street between Baronne and O'Keefe streets, were overlooked. In more recent years, a nearby hotel tried to demolish the buildings for parking, but didn't succeed.

The two buildings survived, with many of their original architectural features intact, and now they have exciting new life as a boutique hotel dreamed up by two of the youngest new developers in the city, Keely Williams and A.J. Brooks.

Williams was walking by the two structures one day when she noticed a "For Sale" sign. Though the buildings were dilapidated, she excitedly told Brooks that they held promise.

He agreed. "We were so young and innocent back then," Brooks joked recently. The two friends are both from Columbus, Ohio, and went to high school together, but didn't get to know each other until they met again in the office of architect Marcel Wisznia, for whom Williams was working at the time. Williams was getting experience with historic building renovations under Wisznia's wing while Brooks was simultaneously learning about historic property development from his employer, local developer Brian Gibbs. When Williams saw the two sagging structures on Union Street, she recognized an opportunity for herself and Brooks to develop a project on their own.

Brooks remembered back to a real estate class he took while earning his MBA from Tulane University a few years before, when students were assigned different real estate projects to "develop." The two Union Street buildings had been assigned to one of his classmates, who had dubbed the project "cajones" because of the difficulty of making the buildings financially viable through redevelopment. "He called it that because anyone who took on the project must have cajones," Brooks said.

But Brooks and Williams had a plan — redevelop the buildings into a boutique hotel, which would be a unique offering in that part of the CBD, and save money by running the hotel themselves. They purchased the buildings in 2014 under the company name Level Line Development, and Williams drew up preliminary designs. The renovation would be





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The rooftop lounge, not yet furnished as of deadline, will soon be a relaxing hang-out spot for customers of the hotel; A shot looking down on the in-progress renovation; One of the hotel's guest rooms, featuring restored original plaster walls. OPPOSITE PAGE: Keely Williams and A.J. Brooks, owners and developers of the new Catahoula Hotel in downtown New Orleans (pictured bottom left).

historic tax credits to help finance the rehabilitation of their buildings. "But tax credits can only get you so far," Brooks said. As the partners searched for additional funding, friends at the nearby Meraux Foundation suggested they reach out to the Preservation Resource Center.

Brooks called Leah Tubbs, PRC's easement director, and after months of discussion, Brooks and Williams decided to put a preservation easement on their buildings. PRC accepted the easement donation, and is now charged with ensuring the protection of each building's exterior and maintenance in pristine condition in perpetuity.

The donation brought Williams and Brooks a tax incentive that global X, a Cleveland-based historic tax equity company, helped the duo monetize to make this project possible. "global X partnered with Ley Line Development to rehabilitate and preserve this boutique-style hotel in the heart of New Orleans," said Antonin Robert, Chief Production and Compliance Officer of global X.

global X, with a staff of 28 professionals and 15 years in business, specializes in financing historic rehabilitation projects across the country by placing equity to help adaptive reuse projects and historic preservation. Their unique platform focuses on transferring tax assets made available through government-sponsored programs designed to attract private capital to initiatives that support social and economic objectives. "This project doesn't happen without that additional money," Brooks said. "What PRC's easement program has done is made this building, which sat vacant for years, viable for the future." "Without PRC's help, this project wouldn't have come into existence,"

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THE TWO HISTORIC BUILDINGS that comprise the Catahoula Hotel were both constructed in the 19th century — one in the 1840s, the other in the 1890s. One faces Union Street plainly while the other, which is attached but one floor shorter, angles back towards Baronne to create a corner entrance with character. "The buildings are cool historic assets amid the skyscrapers, outside of the French Quarter," Brooks said. "But this area was once all buildings like this, if you look at old Sanborn maps."

Not anymore — these are two of the few that remain. Brooks and Williams are banking on the authentic character of these two buildings to draw in not only overnight customers to stay in the hotel, but locals looking for a great cocktail or meal, as well.

The pair has hired a food and beverage director to curate a Peruvian-inspired menu and pisco bar on the building's ground floor. Décor for the indoor/outdoor dining and drinking space includes original brick, reclaimed terrazzo floors and black-and-white tile floors replicated from what was unearthed during renovation.

The bar and restaurant connect to the cozy hotel reception area, which has space for people and their dogs (this is a dog-friendly hotel — the name is the Catahoula, after all) to lounge. Behind and above those public spaces lie the hotel's 35 rooms, which each feature a walk-in, spa-like shower, custom built-in furniture made from wood reclaimed from the site and cypress from Louisiana swamps, mattresses by Casper, and restored original materials, including plaster and exposed brick walls. Some rooms have private terraces, others balconies which were recreated with the cast iron design original to the build-



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The hotel's chic bar, with a cocktail menu centered around the South American liqueur pisco. The floors were recreated from a tile pattern that exact spot had originally; A three-story-tall installation of local burlesque dancer Trixie Minx in the hotel by artist Walker Babington; A pisco-infused cocktail; A brick pattern that Williams sourced from a 1920s pattern book covers an interior wall; Some of the hotel's guest rooms are exposed to the elements, meaning guests will be escorted to their rooms by hotel staff with umbrellas if necessary.



An original outbuilding has been incorporated into the complex, housing guest rooms, as has a back wing that has a roof overhang but no exterior wall to protect from the elements. For guests staying in those rooms, their experience may vary given the weather. "In the driving rain we will have umbrellas and bellhops to help people get to their rooms, but this is all part of the authentic New Orleans experience," Brooks said.

Associates with Terrell-Fabacher Architects designed the hotel and have been on site every day throughout the renovation, Brooks said. In addition to the guest rooms, the architects helped carve out a space on the shorter building's roof to serve as a rooftop deck and bar.

This intimate spaces such as the rooftop lounge that Brooks and Williams hope will drive clientele their way. A small gem in a sea of large corporate hotels, the pair know that the Catahoula is a product that is at once a throwback to the neighborhood's past and a chic and modern place that people will enjoy returning for years to come.

And what about that name? Brooks and his wife adopted a Catahoula/Lab mix,

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