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# Landmark city hotel regains some grandeur

## Hotel Brexton, built in 1891, will reopen Feb. 1 after years of vacancy and deterioration

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A once-endangered Baltimore landmark that defied redevelopment for two decades will finally gain new occupants when the Hotel Brexton reopens in two weeks.

Richard Naing of RWN Development Group spent \$4.5 million to restore and upgrade the building at 868 Park Ave. for use as a 29-room hotel. He plans to operate it as a sister to another property he owns, the Inn at the Colonnade on University Parkway.

Naing is the last of several developers to buy the building and announce plans for its restoration. One backed out after the terrorist attacks of 2001. Others started work but ran out of money. Naing completed his restoration in less than three years.

"We are very proud to be finishing what we started, even though many others had tried," Naing said. "Hotel Brexton, abandoned and in terrible condition when I purchased it, has been a labor of love. ... We are very excited to bring this jewel of Baltimore back to life."

Designed by Charles E. Cassell, the architect of the old Stewart's department store on Howard

The Brexton is on Park Avenue in downtown Baltimore. (Baltimore Sun photo by Jed Kirschbaum / January 19, 2010)



Street and the former Stafford and Junker hotels, the Brexton opened in 1891 as a 60-room residential hotel with shared bathrooms and later was converted to apartments. One famous resident was Wallis Warfield (later Simpson), who lived there briefly as a child and went on to marry the former Edward VIII of England to become the Duchess of Windsor.

A favorite of architecture buffs because of its turrets, spires and dormers, the seven-level building deteriorated over the years and became vacant in the late 1980s. Attracted by the Brexton's distinctive exterior and rich history, developers explored plans to turn it into condominiums, student housing or commercial space, but failed to carry out their plans. Naing's company bought it in 2007 and has been working since then to turn it into a hotel.

RWN restored the exterior to its original appearance and reconfigured the interior to create guest rooms with private baths, contemporary furnishings and 21st-century amenities such as flat-screen TVs and wireless Internet access.

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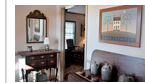
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Hotel Brexton will be managed by Naing International Enterprises as part of the Historic Hotels of America network. The rate for most rooms will be \$179 per night. The top floor has three rooms that can be linked, including one called the Wallis Warfield Simpson Suite.

According to project manager and designer Daniel Raffel, the building is intended to appeal to an array of travelers who want to be close to midtown Baltimore and the **Mount Royal** cultural district - including musicians performing with the Baltimore Symphony, parents visiting students at the Maryland Institute College of Art and relatives of patients at Maryland General Hospital.

Naing's firm wanted to provide "a state-of-the-art hotel with all the warmth and personal touches one would expect to find at a fine European boutique hotel," Raffel said.

Part of the difficulty of upgrading the building is that it has a triangular footprint and minimal surrounding space. There were few original details in private rooms, because objects such as fireplace

mantels and clawfoot bathtubs were stolen over the years. But the building had 240 windows that needed to be replaced and a spiral stairway worth preserving.

Another design challenge was that the city now requires two stairways to get people out of a midrise structure in case of fire, whereas the original Brexton had only one stair and one elevator. The architects designed a second stairway.

Shortly after the Feb. 1 opening, the Brexton will add a cafe on its lower level, a branch of the Gifford's ice cream shop chain. It has arranged with the nearby City Cafe to provide room service. From the city, Naing acquired part of a public street, Brexton Alley, for an outdoor cafe and parking. MICA students will provide art for the hotel's corridors.


The result is a building that's difficult to compare to any other hotel in Baltimore, Raffel said.

"It's not like anything else," he said.


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