

The atrium of the 21c Museum Hotel is filled with twenty-first-century art, such as *Wheel of Fortune* (suspended) by Anne Peabody. PHOTO BY JOSH MINOGUE / COURTESY OF THE 21C MUSEUM HOTEL



21c Masterpiece

WORLD CLASS ART-MUSEUM HOTEL COMING TO BENTONVILLE IN 2012

BY ERIC FRANCIS

There's a four-foot-tall red plastic penguin in the hallway outside my room.

Ordinarily, this would be cause for comment, for befuddlement, perhaps even alarm. But this, after all, is the 21c Museum Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky. And there are forty-nine of these critters scattered throughout the building, tucked into corners, standing on the roof — you name it.

And they don't stay in one place, either: By morning, my hallway monitor has vanished, gone to catch some other guest by surprise. Shame, that; I had been planning to dress him up in the plush bathrobe that had been laid out on my bed. Maybe next time.

For those of us in Arkansas (and Memphis, naturally), migratory waterfowl are nothing new in a hotel setting. There is, after all, the Peabody with its ducks. But the red penguins of 21c are only the tip of a very deep and quirky iceberg. And come next year, the good people of the Natural State will be able to experience those charms simply by driving up to Bentonville, where a 21c Museum Hotel will rise just off the historic town square, a short jaunt from the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

And yes, there will be penguins.

It's a boutique hotel. It's a modern art gallery. Put it that way, and 21c sounds like a pretty straightforward place.

But when you walk into the renovated nineteenth-century warehouses at Seventh and Main streets in downtown Louisville, you immediately know this isn't just an expensive place to stay with odd prints hanging on the walls.

There are the penguins, of course — officially *Red Penguins* by Cracking Art Group. But there's also the looped video of a sleeping couple that's projected on the floor in front of the registration desk (*Sleepers* by Abbas Kiarostami). And just around the corner, by the elevators, there is *Text Rain* by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv. You'll definitely dawdle here as you see your own self projected on the facing wall, while words sift down from above and actually stop when they reach your image, as though they were perched on your head, your shoulders, your outstretched arms.

It's a playful art installation, and it speaks very clearly to the idea behind 21c — that you're here to enjoy yourself. It's a philosophy that has succeeded smashingly well, judging by the praise that's been heaped upon the hotel since it opened in 2006. For example, take *Conde Nast Traveler* magazine, which annually polls its readers — a hotel-savvy lot if ever there were one — on their recommendations. For the past two years they've selected 21c as the best hotel in America, and the sixth best in the world.

But the modern art doesn't stop with the lobby. Downstairs, the basement area has been converted



Clean lines and bold accents complement the modern art adorning the walls of the guest rooms. PHOTO BY KENNETH HAYDEN / COURTESY OF THE 21C MUSEUM HOTEL

into a series of galleries with exhibits that rotate about every six months. Some of the art comes from the private collection of hotel founders Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown; during the spring, 21c featured the works of Cuban artists, some of whom had not previously been exhibited outside of their home country.

Another thing about the galleries: They are not just for hotel guests. The exhibition space is open to the public twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. That's another nod to the hotel's philosophy — art is good, and it's good for everyone, and the more people you can expose to it, the better.

The Bentonville hotel will actually be larger than the one in Louisville — one hundred rooms compared to ninety, more meeting and exhibit space. The building will be new construction, but its exterior will fit with the city's historic and extensively renovated square.

The art will still be modern, said William Morrow, 21c's museum director.

"We're starting with a blank canvas," Morrow said. "An older building has its challenges in terms of elevation changes, straight lines. We'll be able to create spaces for discovery."

With twelve thousand square feet of exhibition space to work with, Morrow said 21c will be a natural complement to the nearby Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

"There's already some crossover," he said of the acquisition of modern works by Crystal Bridges. "But the [hotel's] ability to show international

artists, along with emerging and regional artists, is unique."

And so, he notes, is Bentonville. Morrow said he is in the process of learning more about the community and the region, and he's already planning his exhibitions for when the hotel opens in 2012. The combination of 21c and Crystal Bridges in the Ozarks of north Arkansas, he said, will present an extremely unique "museum complex" that will not only draw visitors from far away, but provide those in the immediate region with an unparalleled cultural resource.

"You don't have to go to a major metropolitan area to see great art," he said.

And, of course, the Bentonville 21c will also have penguins.

"The penguins are going to be a different color," said Steve Wilson, though he won't divulge more than that.

Wilson has dropped in unexpectedly during lunch at Proof on Main, the hotel's standout eatery. He's tall and slender, gray-haired with a neatly trimmed beard, decked out in a medium-blue jacket with white pinstripes. He could be any businessman casually attired for the weekend, really, if it weren't for the eyeglasses: They have bright red frames that really pop. You look at those frames and think, "Yeah, this is a guy who would build a luxury hotel with a modern art museum in it."

But right now, he's talking about food. "We will have a smoker there. We'll have



A contemporary portraits exhibit features, in the foreground, Kehind Wiley's *The Prophet and the King II (Columbus)*. PHOTO BY KENNETH HAYDEN / COURTESY OF THE 21C HOTEL

good regional food,” said Wilson with the same intense sincerity you hear from people who call themselves locavores and have “No Farms, No Food” stickers on their cars. “We’ll seek out the local farmers who are already well known and find some who aren’t known. We will pick out the things that make Arkansas unique.”

This ain’t just talk, either. Wilson understands local sourcing; the menu at Proof includes a list of area farms and producers that provide ingredients. Plus, he and Brown are part of the local food movement themselves: The Bison Carpaccio served at Proof is made from buffalo raised on their sustainable farm.

But just as you’re about to delve into the really important issues — things like farm-raised versus river-caught catfish — he’s standing up and begging your pardon, must run. He and Brown are also planning a 21c in Cincinnati and have been talking with some folks in Florida, and they’re very involved in local charity work and the like. Meetings to attend, planes to catch — you know the drill.

Then he shakes your hand and says he hopes you enjoy the meal. And you can tell that he really, really means that.

Wilson and Brown — both of whom have art backgrounds and both of whom collect art independently — may have had the vision

that led to 21c, but they don’t run the show by themselves. And the people they’ve assembled are fellow believers, sharing in the passion that seems to seep from the very pores of this place.

“As we’re expanding, we don’t want to be viewed as a chain,” said Molly Swyers, vice president of communications and brand experience for 21c. “Every one will be unique, grounded in the community.”

“We were attracted to Bentonville because it’s a great town, has a lot going for it, is revitalizing its downtown,” adds Craig Greenburg, vice chairman of the company. “Bentonville was not on our target list of cities. We didn’t know nearly as much as we do now. It fits our model of expanding into smaller cities.”

So, why Bentonville? Well, take into account that a partner in this venture is the Walton Family Partnership, and that’s one clue. And the proximity to Crystal Bridges certainly was a draw. But will something as — let’s be frank — progressive as a hotel with a modern art theme fly in a small Southern town? Swyers doesn’t hesitate over the answer: Yes.

“People embrace a sense of discovery when people engage with art,” she said.

Greenburg concurs, noting that in Louisville — a city with very strong Southern roots for all its cosmopolitan aspirations — the hotel has

become a destination in and of itself.

“You’d be shocked at the diverse nature of people in here,” he said, “people of all ages, all backgrounds, all interests.”

“When we opened this property, we didn’t expect this to happen,” Swyers adds. “21c has become kind of a cultural center — poetry readings, yoga, movie screenings. That aspect of 21c will be carried out [in Bentonville].”

For a man whose town is about to be the site of a multi-yeet-undisclosed-million-dollar, world-class luxury hotel project, Ed Clifford is remarkably laid-back.

But then, consider that Bentonville is already home to J.B. Hunt trucking, Tyson Foods, and a local family by the name of Walton and their rather successful five-and-dime business.

“We’ve got the biggest of deals down at Eighth and Walton,” said Clifford, president and CEO of the Bentonville/Bella Vista Chamber of Commerce.

He means Wal-Mart’s corporate headquarters, natch. Oh, yes — and don’t forget the Crystal Bridges Museum rising just down the road.

“We think there will be 250,000 visitors a year to Crystal Bridges,” Clifford said. “So we’re a town of 35,000. We’re where the world comes to do business on a regular basis. Now all of a sudden,

we’re where the world comes to see American art. We’re used to big deals — this won’t panic anybody.”

Still, he recognizes that having a hotel like 21c just off the square will appeal to a definite demographic that is already coming to Bentonville, or will be soon.

“Let’s say you’re a Wal-Mart supplier. There isn’t any top dollar you’ll pay to stay here,” Clifford said. “Or let’s say you’re flying in from New York or Miami or LA to see Crystal Bridges. Who pays \$800 to fly to XNA and back? Suppliers with an order for several million dollars. If they’re going to pay \$275 for a room, it won’t make any difference.”

Still, the addition of one hundred luxury rooms to a region with more than seventy-four hundred hotel rooms already isn’t going to cause any pain to the lower-priced chains like the Red Roof Inn, he said, though the availability of meeting space right on the Bentonville Square might impact the Embassy Suites in nearby Rogers. But there will be a ripple effect, said Clifford: Five new restaurants are in the works for downtown Bentonville, plus a four-star hotel and another hotel near the airport, as well as a parking deck next to 21c that will benefit every business on the square by relieving pressure for on-street parking.

Yet for all of that, Clifford maintains a Zen-like calm when discussing Bentonville’s prospects. He said the attitude just comes with the territory.



Editions 1–49 (of 250) of the red plastic penguin by Cracking Art serve as the hotel’s quirky, unofficial ambassadors. The 21c Pip Mobile is by Monica Mahoney. PHOTO BY KENNETH HAYDEN / COURTESY OF THE 21C MUSEUM HOTEL

“When people come in from outside, they say, ‘Gosh, they’re awfully laid-back down there,’” he said. “Well, we host the largest stockholder meeting in the world, the largest retailer in the world, the largest protein provider, one of the largest trucking companies. ... We’re ready for it.”

“Plus, how many places can you sit on the square, then walk seventeen hundred feet through a trail system and wind up in one of the best museums in the world?” he asked, leaning back in his chair and finally allowing a glimmer of pride to flicker in his eyes. “That’s pretty cool.”

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