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TRAVEL

Views from one of the private terraces of The Marlton's two penthouse suites, each offering a lounge area from which to escape the hustle and bustle of New York.

STREETS AHEAD

A FORMER NEW YORK DOSSHOUSE IS TRANSFORMED INTO A PARISIAN-INSPIRED HOTEL UNDER THE DIRECTION OF NEW ZEALAND-BORN SEAN MACPHERSON.

PHOTOGRAPHER TONY AMOS PRODUCER/WRITER LEE TULLOCH



Hotelier extraordinaire Sean MacPherson, **LEFT**, in The Marlton's lobby, with its floor-to-ceiling windows that look out onto Eighth Street. Unfussy decor, flea-market finds (including much of the artwork) and designer touches such as the pendant light from Dutch design firm Droog in the penthouse suite's living room, **TOP LEFT**. The pairing of Squares by Peter Dunham and a pendant light from New York design firm Apparatus makes a statement in the welcoming lobby, **TOP RIGHT**, and a reproduction Serge Mouille pendant light in the small but comfortably appointed king guestroom, **RIGHT**, all lend to the hotel's Parisian-inspired elegance.



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Most of the streets off Fifth Avenue in New York's Greenwich Village are lined with beautiful brownstone row houses, but Eighth Street has always been something of an anomaly. Primarily a commercial street, it runs between Sixth Avenue in the west across to Avenue D in the East Village, cutting a swathe through once-Bohemian downtown, now the domain of the well-heeled.

The scrappy block between Fifth and Sixth avenues has long been known as the street you head to if you hanker for cheap shoes or a Gray's Papaya 99-cent hotdog. Many of the buildings have seen better days and empty shopfronts make the facades seem further dispirited.

But things have begun to change since Sean MacPherson moved in. The successful New Zealand-born hotelier is responsible for spearheading the regeneration of chronically down-at-heel New York neighbourhoods, such as the Bowery and the Meatpacking District, by boldly opening stylish hotels (The Bowery Hotel, The Maritime Hotel, The Jane and Lafayette House) where once there were only flophouses. Now he has turned his attention to Eighth Street with the unveiling of The Marlton, a charming 107-room hotel in a building with a notorious past that was most recently a freshman dormitory for nearby university, The New School.

"I always like these places that are in the heart of it and yet get somehow overlooked," MacPherson explains from a corner of a sofa in the 'living room' lobby of the new hotel. "What I kind of like is that it's gone unnoticed," he says of The Marlton. "It's a little gem waiting for its polish."

The hotel was built in 1900 as low-cost accommodation. At the time, the neighbourhood

was filling with artists attracted to cheap rooms and studios, only a stone's throw from the rarefied houses of Washington Square, written about by Henry James and Edith Wharton. "It was something of a flophouse. It wasn't glamorous," MacPherson says.

But, for such a modest building, over the years it has housed some illustrious — and notorious — guests. In the late 1950s Beat poet Jack Kerouac lived there and wrote two novellas. Comedian Lenny Bruce was a resident in 1964 during his obscenity trial, as was Valerie Solanas in 1968 when she shot Andy Warhol. Over a century, actors such as Lillian Gish, John Barrymore, Maggie Smith and a young Mickey Rourke have stayed there. "It was cheap and, especially then, there were no hotels downtown. If you were Lenny Bruce and needed a room you could go to the Chelsea or Gramercy Park hotels, but there was nothing down here," MacPherson explains.

When the building became available it was very run-down. One of Eighth Street's ubiquitous shoe shops was housed on the ground floor. "The good thing is it hadn't gone through decade after decade of renovation. It was somewhat original, which helped get some clues to what to do.

It needed everything, but it felt as if it still had its integrity or dignity just a bit." MacPherson says he was inspired by the small hotels of the Left Bank of Paris, such as the Hôtel des Saints-Pères. "It was small, but it was elegant and I always liked that. In Paris everything's a bit elegant but a bit shabby," he says. "I felt this neighbourhood was the most Parisian part of downtown New York."

MacPherson designs, builds and decorates his hotels "the old-fashioned way", using his own funds, along with partner hoteliers Richard Born and Ira Drukier. "It's personal," he says. In planning The Marlton, MacPherson stayed at the Paris Ritz before it closed for renovation (it is scheduled to reopen at the end of 2014). "So often people feel that they want to make hotels that look like their budget. I kind of wanted to do the opposite. The rooms are tiny but they're done in the most luxurious way possible." He jokingly calls the project "Honey, I shrunk the Ritz".

The rooms *are* very small but they're very well designed, with raised beds so suitcases can slip underneath, plenty of storage space and small but practical bathrooms. The decor is enchanting, with marble bathrooms, crown mouldings, brass lamps, large flat-screen TVs, Côté Bastide amenities and quality bedding.

The rooms don't have desks, but many guests take advantage of the long communal table in the lobby, with its complimentary WiFi and great little espresso bar, where barista Joe brews delicious Ferndell coffee. Guests can eat at the 98-seat restaurant adjoining the lobby, or take their meals at the communal table. "I like the European idea of a complimentary breakfast and the sense of community in a hotel," MacPherson says.

The hotel's casual vibe and reasonable price point

will ensure it's continually packed to the rafters. Plus, as MacPherson points out, "Eighth Street is the most geographically convenient location downtown." It's an easy walk to SoHo, Chelsea and East Village, and the nearby West Fourth Street subway station connects to the major subway lines.

And what about all those famous ghosts? Do they haunt the hotel? "I like ghosts," MacPherson says. "But I think this renovation has been so thorough, we exorcised them!" **VL**

Rooms start from \$275 per night. marltonhotel.com.

GETTING THERE

Vogue Living flew to New York via Honolulu with Hawaiian Airlines, travelling on its revamped Business Class with wide leather seats, meals by top chef Chai Chaowasaree and personal touch-screen monitors. Hawaiian Airlines flies daily non-stop services between Sydney or Brisbane and Honolulu and operates non-stop flights to and from New York, making Hawaii a convenient mid-point stopover for travellers from Australia. hawaiianairlines.com.