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Watergate Hotel Whiskey Bar

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New tricks for old buildings

It's a tale of two hotels; star hotelier André Balazs is set to transform Camden Town Hall while designer Ron Arad is revamping Washington DC's Watergate



BY CAROLINE ROUX
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When the master hotelier André Balazs dreamt of opening the first [Standard hotel](#) in New York in the mid-noughties, he knew just what kind of building

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he wanted to put it in: the sort of soaring and optimistic edifice in metal and glass that had sprung up in Manhattan in the 1950s and 1960s. “Something with the architectural purity and confidence of that period,” he told me last summer. With no available empty building on the horizon, he enlisted [Ennead Architects](#) in New York to design something derived in part from those specifications; not a pastiche but a 21st-century rethink of the International Style. The result, completed in 2009, turned out to be a triumph, rising up 17m from the street level, its two wings – with sleek glass and steel facades – straddling the newly planted High Line park.



Watergate Hotel lobby by Ron Arad

[Enlarge](#)

Over in London, however, Balazs has struck rather luckier. Having successfully opened the [Chiltern Firehouse in Marylebone](#), in 2014 – known for its ironic boarding house chic interior and high celebrity count, and occupying a Grade II-listed former fire station – he’s gone on to acquire a unique piece of 1970s architecture that sits unapologetically opposite St Pancras Station. Now he has

planning permission to convert the 150,000 square foot Camden Town Hall annexe into the next Standard Hotel (there are others, in New York, Miami and Los Angeles).

The building – its distinctive concrete façade dotted with a grid of recessed windows – was completed in 1974 and designed by the borough of Camden’s in-house architecture team. Permission has been granted for the addition of three new floors, to be designed along with the whole renovation by London architects [Orms](#). These will contain the sort of glamorous rooftop bar and restaurant on which Balazs's reputation partly rests.

While Orms will be turning an old office block into chic accommodation, over in Washington DC, the London-based designer [Ron Arad](#) has been transforming the interior of the upscale [Watergate Hotel](#). The building is part of the Watergate complex, designed in 1962 by the Italian architect Luigi Moretti, and made famous by the 1972 theft which occurred in its office tower, and turned out to be the work of President Richard Nixon’s administration. (Much of the film *All The Presidents Men*, which told the story four years later, was shot here.)



Rooftop of The Standard High Line

[Enlarge](#)

The scandal has never affected Watergate’s real estate values, and its three imposing apartment buildings have always contained some of the most desirable accommodation

in the city. But the hotel fell on hard times and was closed in 2007 – \$125 million is being spent to bring it back to life.



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The hotel building is an iconic curved form, which presents both pluses and minuses in its interior spaces. "It's not without problems," said Ron Arad. "The floor to ceiling heights in the public spaces are low. But it is a lovely example of a Moretti building, and deserves our respect. We had to develop a parallel diagram inside that would live at peace with the building."

Arad has developed a system of gleaming internal walls made of bronze piping that run in continuous curves through some of the public spaces, while those in the whiskey bar (named the Next Whiskey Bar, after the song in Kurt Weill's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogany*) are composed of old bottles. The designer has also created a bespoke upholstered Watergate chair with the Italian manufacturers Moroso. "It's a historical continuation," said Arad. "There's a chair that I designed a couple of decades after this building was completed, called the Victoria and Albert. And the Watergate refers to it in a way." Once the hotel re-opens, probably at the end of this year, it's bound to be the site of a few more scandals, though hopefully of a more light-hearted kind.

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