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Behind the \$19M effort to turn a run-of-the-mill chain hotel into an Austin hospitality oasis 🗝️

GM David Lang expounds on extensive makeover, remodeling process



By Marissa Luck – Staff Writer, Austin Business Journal
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Two years after snatching up the lakefront Radisson hotel in a [\\$130 million deal](#), the [Sydell Group](#) unveiled the downtown Austin property's transformation earlier this month that aims to make it more competitive in an increasingly crowded hospitality landscape.

Rebranded as the Line Austin, the extensive makeover modernized the building and enhanced its original mid-century modern architecture. Beyond a complete redesign of nearly every inch of the hotel, there's a new restaurant called Arlo Grey led by [Kristen Kish](#), winner of season 10 of Bravo's "Top Chef," and a new café, Alfred Coffee. A rooftop lounge called P6 is expected to open this fall with views of Lady Bird Lake.

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The remodel was estimated to cost \$19.3 million, according to [records](#) from the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation, although the Sydell Group declined to confirm the estimate.

Austin Business Journal talked with Line Austin General Manager [David Lang](#) about his experience relaunching the hotel. With a long career in hospitality, Lang joined Sydell to spearhead the hotel's relaunch after nearly three years as director of hotel operations for New Waterloo. There he oversaw operations for two darlings of the Austin hotel scene, Hotel Ella and South Congress Hotel.

While it was hard to leave New Waterloo, Lang said he couldn't pass up the opportunity to be a part of the Sydell Group's ambitious plans for the former Radisson.

What were the most important parts of the remodel? How did Sydell Group decide what to focus on?

Really the building kind of informs a lot of those decisions and most of what has been done has been predicated on a love affair with the lake and restoring the building's really magnificent mid-century brutalist architecture. One of the really unique things about coming into the lobby now is you're just greeted with beautiful wide, open spaces that flow so naturally into each other. There are thoughtful touches around property that really are looking to the nature and to integrate the property with the setting on the lake. Like we have these super cool mid-century-inspired hanging lamps that look like little cluster of fireflies [when viewed from the outside, as a nod to Texas' seasonal fireflies.]

[When the hotel was built in 1965] the river was not a focal point that it is now. The restaurant originally didn't have the floor-to-ceiling windows that showcase what is now Town Lake and the ballroom didn't have floor-to-ceiling windows. Even prior to the remodel you had to go to specific areas of the building to really enjoy the views. Our intent was really just to open everything up.

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There are so many new hotels that have recently opened downtown, such as Fairmont, JW Marriott, Aloft. How do you continue to stay competitive and relevant? How will set yourself apart?

I think the beautiful thing about being in a competitive hotel market in Austin is that it's still situation where the rising tide lifts all ships. There's a lot of phenomenal hotels that are new to market and we try to interact with everyone more as a partner than competitor because we want Austin as a destination to thrive. But as it relates to setting ourselves apart, one of thing that probably was one of my favorite aspects of this project is that Sydell engaged a number of local artists that secured over 500 unique pieces of art. And the design just really embraces Austin and making Austin a part of what we do is going to be inherent in that success.

What about the timing of a remodel? How have you tried to keep the hotel profitable during the remodel and did you have to adjust your rates?

Of course. During the latter stages of renovation, we were operating with pared-down facilities and offerings. There's not a specific formula in stone that we went with but obviously the market kind of drives the baseline prices then we try to position ourselves appropriately with that paradigm. [During the renovation] the value exchange we hoped to make was the phenomenal location – our property is four blocks from the Convention Center, right there on Congress Avenue, within walking distance to Rainey Street. The great thing is moving forward we get to offer those same things but with what we hope is a best-in-class property.

[During a remodel] you just do the best you can with what you have. During South by Southwest we had a good portion of the old rooms on the market, but really we're looking to the future [and our] focus has been giving the building new life. We plan to have basically everything done by October in time for [Austin City Limits music festival] and Formula 1 and we're super excited about SXSW in 2019.

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How do you best manage or handle online reviews, especially during a remodel when some reviews might not be glowing?

I think all businesses today hopefully have learned to embrace the feedback that they get whether it's positive or negative. It's probably a little cliché, but if you don't get that feedback then there's not an opportunity to get better. I think we have a good sense of self-awareness and understanding our strengths. [If for some reason] we didn't provide the right experience, we want to own up to that and try to [make that guests experience better] to turn them into an advocate [for the brand] as opposed to someone who doesn't like it.

What's your occupancy rate and how has it changed?

We've had healthy occupancy throughout the renovation. The property is doing well, but I'd be reticent to give away specifics. *[Editor's note: Starting rates for the hotel on Expedia were \$165 per night for an early July reservation.]* But the property has been very well received and obviously Sydell at large, with our sister hotels in Los Angeles and D.C., has a large following. And with [new restaurant] Arlo Grey we're excited with how this property is coming out right out of the gate.

Editor's note: Answers edited for brevity and clarity.