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Why would you make a hotel less trendy? Behold, the Hotel Washington.

In an era of authenticity, the historic property is ditching the W brand and returning to its roots



The Hotel Washington, formerly the W Hotel, has revived its original name. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

Jonathan Swift is right yet again: Everything old is new again, this time at the Hotel Washington.

The historic hotel, with the renowned rooftop patio that overlooks the White House and the Washington Monument, was relaunched last month after a decade as the uber-hip W. It was trendy, it was loud, and it was a teensy bit pretentious, if we're being honest. But, now, the original name is back, along with a renewed emphasis on the hotel's 106-year-old story — which includes Ziegfeld Follies dancers, drunk Shriners, presidents, movie stars and Elvis.

"I like to say there are many hotels in D.C.," says general manager Stephane Vogel, "but there's only one Hotel Washington."

Which is a polite way of saying: When you've been around for more than a century in the nation's capital — a city of tradition, power and influence — you don't need to worry too much about being hip. Especially these days, when sustainability and authenticity are being reembraced.



The lobby area of the Hotel Washington this month. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

Truth is, this town is occasionally cool but always historic. Vogel arrived in Washington 23 years ago amid the explosion of artsy, boutique hotels — which, like many restaurants, are white-hot for a year or two, then disappear. In 2021, the W was reportedly sold to the Schulte Hospitality Group, which immediately reclaimed the famous name. Vogel came onboard last year, determined to de-hip the hotel and highlight its long history.

There's a delicate line between respecting the past and living in it — most hotels are not literal museums. The trick is achieving something that seems timeless without feeling forced, an aesthetic that many of the grand old European hotels have mastered.

The Beaux-Arts building, opened on May 22, 1917, sits one block from the White House — making it the easy choice for anyone visiting the president. VIP guests have included Duke Ellington, John Wayne, Will Rogers and Tom Cruise. The cast of the Ziegfeld Follies stayed there; Shriners celebrated the end of Prohibition by riding horses through the lobby. (Alas, no photos survive.)

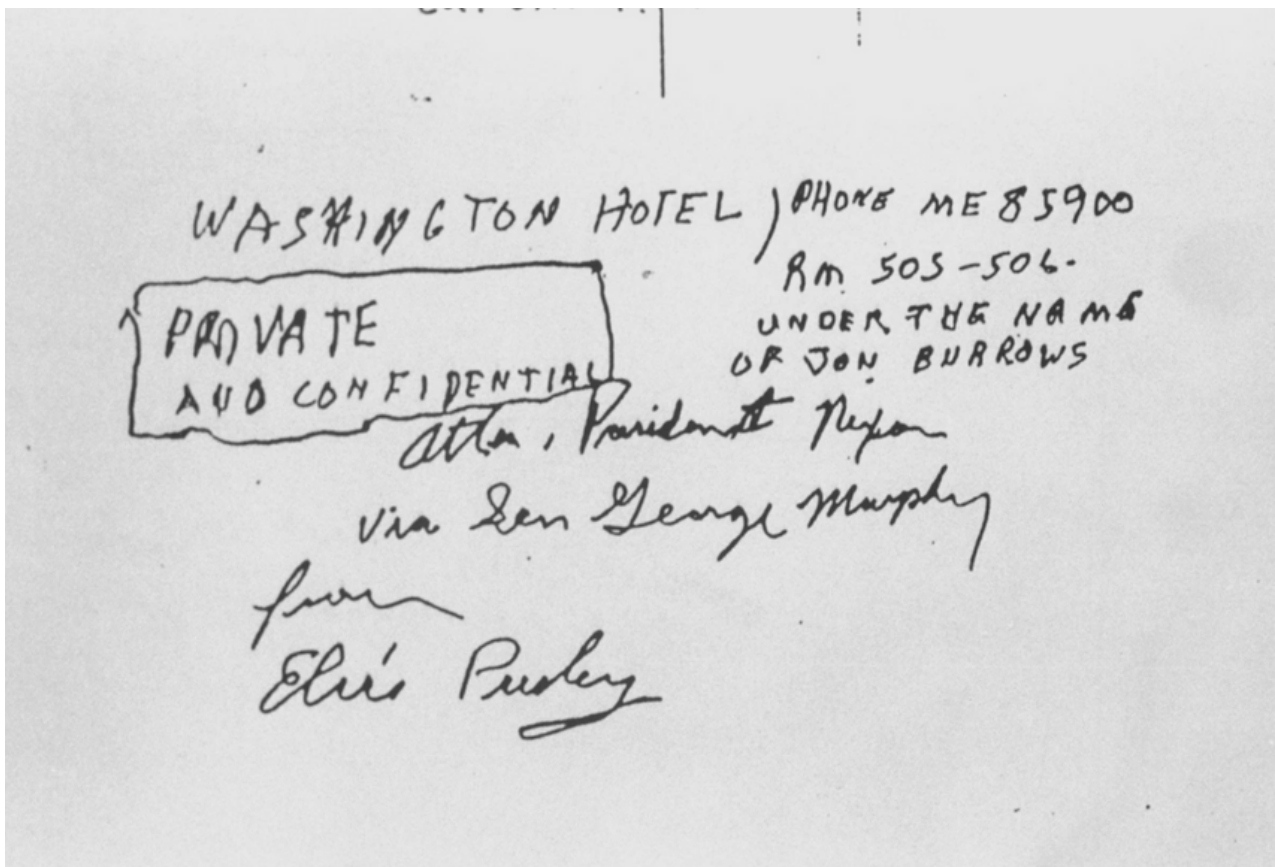


The Hotel Washington in 1937, photographed by Theodor Horydczak. (Library of Congress)

It was also home to many dignitaries who liked the luxury and convenience of living in a hotel just a stone's throw from the White House. Residents included several members of Congress. Supreme Court Justice Frank Murphy and Vice President John Nance Garner both lived there for almost a decade.

And, of course, the infamous, week-long stay of Elvis.

In December 1970, the superstar checked in hoping for a meeting with President Richard M. Nixon. "Sir," he wrote in a letter, "I am staying at the Washington Hotel, Room 505-506-507 [now Suite 406] ... I am registered under the name of Jon Burrows. I will be here for as long as it takes to get the credentials of a Federal Agent." The famous [photo op of the resulting White House encounter](#) is still one of the most-requested shots in the U.S. National Archives.



A note from Elvis Presley to President Richard M. Nixon. (Thomas S. England/Getty Images)

The hotel was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1995, so there were many tears [when it closed in 2007](#), facing a renovation and a future as part of the sleek, trendy W franchise. The W brand was young, arty, fashion forward, with a lobby as “living room” and packed bars with pretty young people.

The new vibe was less elegance and more nightclub — house music, zebra prints and red patent leather — that you might be admitted to if you were cool enough. But cool was in: Obama arrived in Washington just as the W opened, and the city tried to be as effortlessly sophisticated as the new president was.

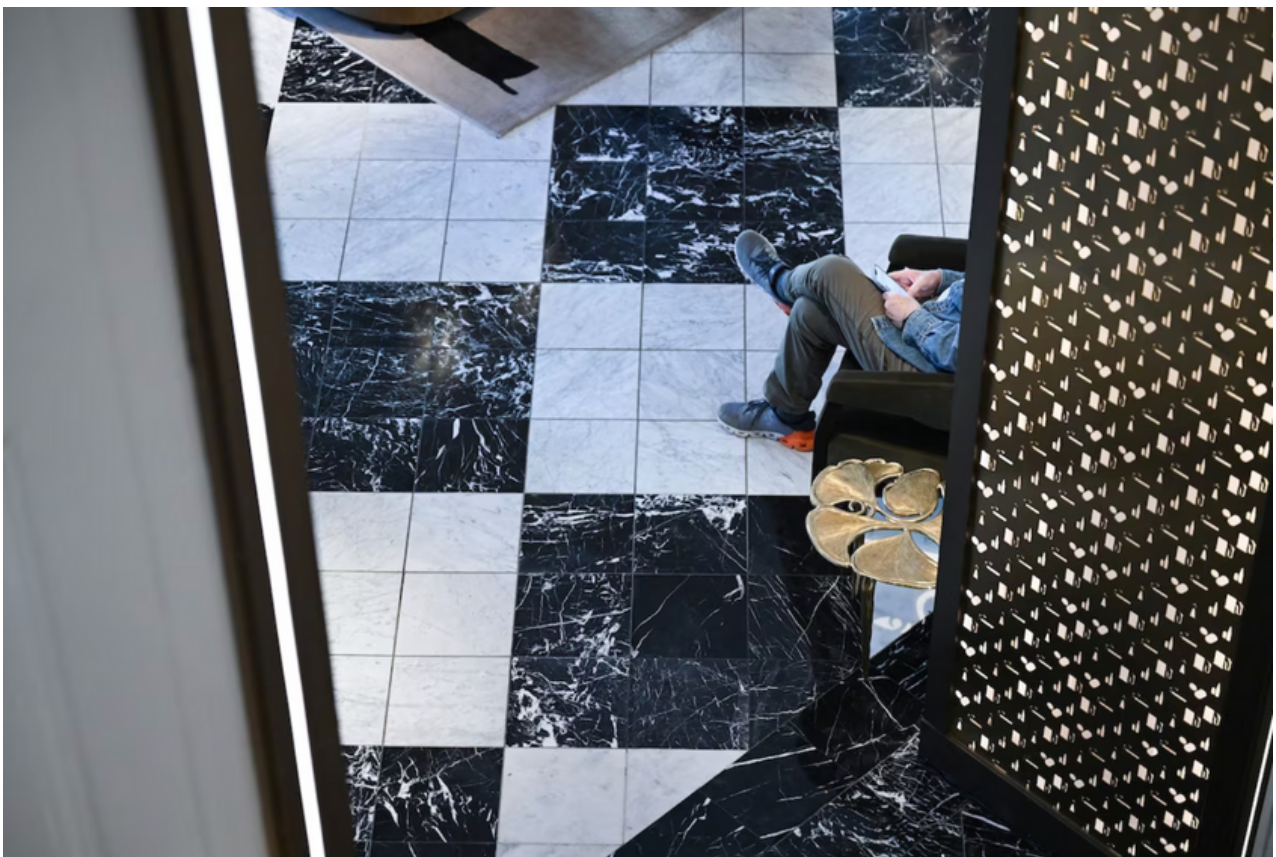
The W “really tapped into this new wave of travelers that were expecting something else than just staying at a boring hotel in a boring room,” says Vogel. “They did a fantastic job. But travelers have come to a point where too much hipness is no longer really wanted. I think there is a need for people to understand where they stay, a connection to the local.”

That tracks with current trends in the hotel industry, says Stacy Shoemaker, the editor in chief of Hospitality Design magazine. “The buzz words are ‘local,’ ‘authentic,’ ‘true to place,’” she said. “We’re seeing a lot of historic renovations and adaptive reuse. The bones and history of a place mean more and more.”

In New York City, [a new generation is flocking to historic venues](#) — Bemelmans in the Carlyle Hotel, the Plaza Hotel, the Rainbow Room — to experience the glamour and sophistication of the classic cocktail lounges and hotels. Shoemaker says there will always be room for a new, cool spot — but people come to Washington for history, and “leaning into that history makes it more meaningful for guests. It’s creating that soul.”



The massive crystal chandeliers that are now near a spiral staircase will be moved to the lobby. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)



The lobby area got a sophisticated facelift. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

In 2019, the W unveiled a \$50 million renovation that proved to spectacularly ill-timed — less than a year before the pandemic crippled the global travel and hospitality industry. The hotel was sold in 2021, and Vogel was hired the next year to keep what works and jettison the rest.

The zebra prints have been replaced by sophisticated neutrals. The soaring lobby has been redone in more-muted colors. The massive crystal chandeliers — original to the hotel and hanging in a staircase — will replace the modern lobby fixtures soon. Vogel is keeping the ballroom carpet (an abstract take on Pierre L'Enfant original design of the nation's capital) and the ceilings of the three elevators depicting the constellations in the night sky on July 4, 1776; the hotel's opening in 1917; and Obama's first inauguration.

Unchanged: the rooftop terrace, the jewel in the hotel's crown. You might have seen it in "The Godfather: Part II" or "No Way Out." Arguably the most beautiful view of Washington, it was a hidden gem for decades, before becoming an exclusive hot spot during the W incarnation. There were lines and ropes to get up, and the New Yorker held its annual White House Correspondents' reception on the too-packed-to-move space.



The Washington Monument is seen from the roof of the Hotel Washington. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

Before Vogel worked at the hotel, the roof was the first place he took his parents when they visited from Switzerland. He showed them the White House, the monuments and, far in the distance, the top of Arlington Cemetery.

Now this view is part of his hotel, one that's woven into the story of the city and the country. "The stories are our history," he says, "and history always endures."