



The Robey and The Hollander

CHICAGO

Grupo Habita extends its presence in North America with a twin hotel and hostel concept in an up-and-coming area of Chicago.

Words: Lauren Ho | Photography: © Adrian Gaut / Grupo Habita / Design Hotels





It's fantastic! It's perfect timing and in a prime location too – I mean they couldn't have thought of a better place to put these hotels," praises Kevin. Like many locals, Kevin – an Uber driver – is enthusiastically raving about The Robey and The Hollander, a pair of properties that have just opened between Chicago's Wicker Park and Bucktown neighbourhoods.

Precisely located at the six-corner junction where Milwaukee, North and Damen Avenues meet, the hotels – a first for the area – further reinforce the enclave's reputation as the city's hip cultural hub, while highlighting Grupo Habita's particular nose for sniffing out promising hotspots. "When we toured the city and discovered these two properties, it was evident we had to develop a hotel here," says Carlos Couturier, co-owner of Grupo Habita. "We foresaw a great opportunity to be pioneers in an up-and-coming area of Chicago."

With most of its 13 properties scattered around Mexico, this is the company's second venture in North America following the launch of HotelAmericano in New York City five years ago. The Chicago iterations unfolded as a double act when owners DRW Real Estate Investments and local property development firm Convexity presented two distinct buildings adjacent to each other, prompting Grupo Habita to recreate its Downtown twin hotel and hostel concept, already a success in Mexico City.

So, with that in mind, Couturier went on the hunt to secure the

architects to create individual identities for each building and fulfil the group's design-led principles. "We always like to work with different designers on each of our projects, it is part of our philosophy," says Moisés Micha, the brand's co-founder. Couturier agrees: "Design has been the ultimate connectivity between Grupo Habita and its guests. We wanted to bring something new and innovative to Chicago and the design of both properties was a way to do so."

With a previous line-up that includes the likes of India Madhavi, Joseph Dirand and Dimore Studio, selecting a suitable designer who understands the Grupo Habita outlook and who, at the time, has just enough footing in the industry, is a tricky task. But always on the lookout, Couturier and Micha happened upon Belgian designers Nicolas Schuybroek and Marc Merckx, who they appointed to outfit The Robey, the 69-room property housed in the 12-storey Northwest Tower, a slender triangular-shaped Art Deco gem from 1929 that was one of the first skyscrapers to be constructed outside of the downtown area. "For The Robey, we aimed for a designer that could understand the northern climate and create a warm and classic atmosphere, but also unique," explains Couturier of the Design Hotels member. "We wanted them to embrace the original architecture of the building and find inspiration from the time it was built."

Ex-colleagues formerly employed at Antwerp-based firm Vincent Van Duysen, Schuybroek and Merckx have since gone solo, often





Above & Opposite: In The Robey, guestrooms have been fitted out with materials from Carnegie Fabrics, vanity lighting from RH, and faucets from Waterworks



joining forces for larger projects. “The way that we think about architecture, about the interiors, references and materials is very similar,” explains Schuybroek. “For The Robey, we wanted to use the richness and context of both the location and the fabulous building to design something that corresponds to the neighbourhood.”

The result is minimal and warm, encapsulating the heritage of the building and the spirit of the neighbourhood, but with a European twist. Original features, from the revolving door on the ground floor to the marble wall panels in the corridors, have been meticulously restored, creating a rich foundation for the clean, modern aesthetic. Elements such as the terrazzo flooring and wood panelling in the lobby influences a continuation of materials throughout the hotel, including the guest bathrooms, which are all bathed in natural light thanks to a wire glass partition – inspired by the building’s former life as an office – that separates it from the bedroom. Here, a viridescent palette, motivated by the original mossy colour of the building, along with wooden flooring underfoot, combine to create a comforting overtone that highlights the views outside. “The amazing views towards the city are really inspiring,” says Merckx. “And the soft, natural light that comes into the rooms is something we wanted to bring into the bathrooms.” Schuybroek agrees: “The guestrooms provide a fantastic experience – warm but pared down and with natural light.”

Indeed, the building’s unique flatiron shape that slots like a slice of pie right into the intersection of North and Milwaukee Avenues, is the perfect format to provide a cityscape vista from each guestroom, however, Chicago’s sprawling urban landscape is best seen from Up & Up on the 13th floor. Here, the rooftop bar is a cosy space dotted with mid-century modern furnishings, while a grotto-like hollow within the building’s spire has been transformed into a snug private lounge. “For us, it was about sourcing locally and making sure we found the right balance,” explains Schuybroek. “We have mixed custom-made items with beautiful names from the 1940s and 50s such as Edward Wormley, Harvey Probbler and Milo Baughman.”

And while Up & Up is available to The Robey guests only, in true Grupo Habita style, the hotel also has a public rooftop pool and restaurant called The Cabana Club that, located on the roof of The Hollander next door, can only be accessed via The Robey – a disorienting thought that is actually fairly seamless in reality – just one of the smart ways the group has integrated the two hotels.

Occupying a former fireproof warehouse from 1905, The Hollander’s raw, industrial bones are in direct contrast to its Art Deco-embellished neighbour, making it the perfect building to experiment with a new category of accommodation that Grupo Habita have labelled the ‘social stay’. In a bid to redefine the traditional hostel format, the luxury design-led quarters comprise a total of 66 beds



Above & Opposite: The Hollander is characterised by a gritty, rough-hewn undertone with sparse, pared-back furnishings

that are arranged as a series of private and shared rooms sleeping three-to-eight people. Whether for families, groups or independent travellers, the concept is aimed at the modern nomad looking for a social experience.

For the interiors, Couturier, who wanted a smart and playful design, tasked a young collective of French designers called Ciguë. Led by Adrian Hunfalvy, who has since set up his own studio called Delordinaire, the final product is indeed fresh and youthful, inspired by, as Hunfalvy says, the working class utilitarian part of Chicago. He explains: "The interesting thing about the building is that it is both historic and in some ways quite banal. We wanted to bring that to the forefront and keep the existing elements exposed." As such, the original concrete floor has been sealed with an epoxy resin to create a highly polished shine that contrasts with the stripped-down walls and bare piping. This, in turn, creates a gritty, rough-hewn undertone for the sparse, pared-back furnishings that upstairs, comprises custom birch plywood and black-painted steel bunk beds in the shared rooms, while the private rooms also feature accent tables and lighting from

Portland-based Schoolhouse Electric & Supply Co., a minibar and TV. Each quarter also has its own bathroom facilities as well as an individual locker system fitted with charging outlets.

The concept is centred around the ground-floor lobby where laundry facilities and a hipster bike repair shop sit alongside The Hollander Bar & Café. Here, the building's original structural pillars have been dressed with custom green leather banquettes, while a 27ft table functions as a bar, from which artisanal coffee, pre-bottled cocktails and hotdogs are served to a mix of locals and visitors. For something more substantial, guests can nip next door to Café Robey, the street-level restaurant set against the backdrop of Wicker Park.

With the properties located in North America, the designers in Europe and the operators in Mexico, logistics alone should prove a challenge to any project but, no strangers to working with international designers and architects, Couturier and Micha both reiterate the importance of trust and communication, which has successfully resulted in two distinctly different hotels that have been smartly woven together to represent the Grupo Habita brand.

EXPRESS CHECKOUT: 69 guestrooms (The Robey); 66 beds (The Hollander) | 4 restaurants | 2 bars | www.therobey.com; www.thehollander.com
Owner: DRW Real Estate Investments | **Developer:** Convexity Properties | **Operator:** Grupo Habita | **Architect of Record:** Antunovich Associates
Interior Design: Marc Mercx Interiors and Nicholas Schuybroek (The Robey); Delordinaire and Ciguë (The Hollander) | **Lighting Design:** Filament 33