



Introduction

In the heart of downtown, with the winding Chicago River at its feet, Renaissance Chicago Downtown Hotel is in a prime location where business, theater, shopping and recreation merge. However, 25 years after it was built, the hotel wasn't capitalizing on that key asset.

Its design was no longer contemporary or welcoming. Renaissance brand and Carey Watermark Investors Incorporated (CWI) saw an opportunity to expand appeal to out-of-town business guests, as well as to make the hotel a destination for locals. Timing was also on their side — the riverfront was undergoing a dramatic revitalization, including greenways, multi-use paths, and economic development.

The hotel's resulting \$32 million renovation was focused on making a bolder, more modern statement both inside and out. It included two phases. The first focused on the exterior, entrance and expansive first-floor interior, as well as guestrooms and corridors. The second encompassed new space built out over a third-floor rooftop to maximize views and proximity to the river. Throughout both phases, CharterSills collaborated with Hartshorne Plunkard Architecture (HPA) and The Gettys Group to ensure all lighting supported the goal to transform the hotel into a new downtown icon.

Phase 1

The renovation started at the entrance. "The hotel is in a brilliant location, but there was nothing special about its street presence," says Paul Alessandro, Partner at HPA. Now, that is no longer the case.

The enhanced facade integrates color-changing LED fixtures, and a dramatic new porte cochere features new LED cove lighting and LED lamps for the downlights. The CharterSills design team also selected integrated lighting to accent oversized video screens that were commissioned by Gettys to flank the entrance, displaying dynamic graphic images that hint at the experience beyond the doors.

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Partner
Hartshorne Plunkard Architecture

"Now it's completely transformed and modern-looking," says Meg Prendergast, Principal at The Gettys Group. "It really announces that it's a different place."

Inside, one challenge was to highlight large-scale pieces of photography, art and artifacts that provide a sense of discovery and relate to Chicago's rich legacy of visual and performing arts and architecture. The goal was to make the lobby a place where guests would linger and locals would be drawn to spend an evening. "We wanted to create pockets of experiences," Prendergast says. "At the end of the day, the goal was to be more hangout than hotel."

In one seating area, black-and-white art hangs in five windows, each spotlighted with LED color-changing theatrical fixtures that lend a nod to Chicago's vibrant theater scene. Just steps away, the CharterSills team integrated back lighting to draw eyes to dramatic geometric panels behind the first-floor bar.

Elsewhere on the first floor, near the bellman station, a massive art installation depicts a taxi cab. Made entirely of pencils, it features LED strip light integrated around the perimeter to illuminate the texture of the piece. Similar treatment is given to a companion piece nearby. An eclectic mix of materials and millwork on the first floor also add energy. Planning for the integrated lighting in the millwork included building small mockups of tight conditions to ensure the final, correct effects.

"Gettys created some really unique features, and it was great to work with them to integrate lighting and make them really pop," says Erin Held, CharterSills Design Director. She says it was intentional to focus on lighting seat groupings, art and other details — rather than the larger circulation areas. Previously, all the lighting had been uniformly bright. "Now the pathway spaces go a bit softer and quieter while elsewhere we created brighter 'moments.'"

Phase 2

The renovation also addressed an important functional challenge. The hotel needed more space for the many events it hosts. Furthermore, none of the existing event spaces took advantage of the sweeping riverfront outside the hotel.

The remedy was to build out over a third floor rooftop — adding a ballroom with views of the river, plus an additional 4,000 square feet of private event space.

The centerpiece is a 210-person rooftop bar and terrace called “RAISED.” With fire pits and authentic design features including glass, iron, greenery, and reclaimed wood elements, it feels like an upscale urban patio. Throughout the new third-floor spaces, Gettys designed and selected a collection of furnishings, fixtures and accessories that lend a neighborhood feel. The CharterSills team then worked to select lamping and ensure proper integration with the lighting control system. In the ballroom, supplemental cove lighting and downlights were added. As on the first floor, a lighting control system automates changing light levels.

“CharterSills understood that things had to be lit very thoughtfully,” Prendergast says. “We wanted this space to have a different feel from the rest of the hotel — one that made people feel they’d landed somewhere magical. CharterSills understood what kind of lighting was key, and they got it right — ambient, metropolitan yet super sexy.”

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The Result

The outcome exceeded all expectations. At the final aim and adjust, the fixtures were fine-tuned to properly illuminate the art, and light levels were set to create scenes for each time of day and special events.

Prendergast calls that step “the cosmic shift”. Held agrees: “That’s really the moment when you see the project come together.”

The key was communication. CharterSills met with the design team several times to understand and dive deep into the design goals, presenting different concepts and ideas. “It was a great experience working with CharterSills,” Alessandro says. “They are very much a team player and helped us solve many challenges.”

“The thing about good lighting is that you don’t really want to see it. It should be supportive of the design but not call attention to itself. In that sense, they made the building look very beautiful — it is beautifully integrated and controlled. We’ve gotten very positive feedback from our client.”

