

Hotel on North seeks to be in sync with Pittsfield's regeneration



Hotel on North has 45 rooms, each furnished with local goods.

By Anthony Flint

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PITTSFIELD

Some may ask why anyone traveling to the Berkshires, dreamlike with luxury resort properties including Blantyre and Canyon Ranch, would stay in this gritty post-industrial city at the New York border. But a visit here is to witness a small metropolis on the brink of transformation.

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There is also now a really cool place to stay. Hotel on North, in renovated space formerly occupied by a department store, might as well be in SoHo, from the art gallery displays to the local craft beer on tap in the tastefully tattooed barroom. If pastoral retreat is part of your aim, the countryside is minutes away.

Pittsfield, like many similar small cities in New England, had manufacturing running through its veins, from wool to paper to the giant electrical transformers invented by resident William Stanley and built by thousands working for General Electric, the single largest employer in the region for many decades.

When the company withdrew from the town, the inevitable hard times came, with jobs and population loss and little sign of a new raison d'être. All around,

the visitor economy flourished, in southern Berkshire County at Stockbridge, Great Barrington, and Lenox, with assets from Jacob's Pillow to Tanglewood to the Norman Rockwell Museum; even similarly challenged North Adams put itself on the map with Mass MoCA. Pittsfield, though home for many years to some great minor league baseball, never quite got a piece of the action.

Enter David and Laurie Tierney, born and raised in the area, and heirs to a local family construction and development business. They bought the two 19th-century three- and four-story buildings that for years housed the legendary menswear and sporting good emporium, Besse-Clark. The property, across from the YMCA and around the corner from the former home of The Berkshire Eagle, was in recent years the site of restaurants that opened and promptly closed.

In making a go of it, the Tierneys sought to make sure the hotel was part and parcel of the community. The 45 rooms were remodeled and furnished using local artisans like Philip Bastow, who created the bathroom vanities. Amid the exposed brick and tin ceilings, antique maps of the Pittsfield of old and various salvaged items share space with a rotating exhibition of art, sculpture, photography, and other curated pieces. In collaboration with leading Berkshire gallerists, the work of Michael Rousseau, Marita O'Dea Glodt, Peggy Rivers, and many more has been showcased.

Guests are connected to the city in other ways: through a program that allows them to walk dogs from a nearby shelter, for example, or a weekly 2-mile jaunt around town with members of the Berkshire Running Center. Hotel and city, making a go of it, hand in hand.

“We are a part of them and they are a part of us,” said Noel Henebury, sales manager at Hotel on North, who is settling in after moving to Pittsfield initially to be involved in the theater.

The net result is a property that feels like it’s always been there, though the opening was in 2015. The restaurant and bar are well populated; among what appeared to be business meetings over breakfast, an earnest conversation about wind power was overheard. The guest rooms (starting at \$149), especially in the north building, are a delightful retreat, lean and elegant, modern meets Shaker. Everyone gets a locally baked night-time snack, and pre-measured coffee grounds for the morning. The crown jewel is the Library Suite, where the built-ins are so well back-lit they seem to make the literature glow.

Out the front door, boarded-up storefronts are giving way to cafes and an electric scooter store. Around the corner from the Barrington Theater Company, the nightspot Methusela is so popular the local authorities got concerned about overcrowding. In the other direction, at Park Square, District Kitchen was heavily populated well past midnight on a recent night, with craft bourbon being raised to bearded lips.

Henebury, also a board member of Downtown Pittsfield Inc., is helping to keep the momentum going, following in the steps of other smaller legacy cities by shoring up the arts, whether cutting-edge displays of LED lights on buildings and statues around town, to a campaign to paint squat, ugly utility boxes in colorful hues.

When asked to describe the current situation, she described the city as “honest, authentic, and determined.” From the way Hotel on North has settled into the stressed urban fabric, that sounds about right.

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