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News

The Raphael History, Timetable, Tidbits, Myths & Legends

Originally developed and constructed by McCandles Building Company, the nine-story brick building opened as the Villa Serena Apartments in 1928. Alonzo Gentry, a noted local architect of the time, was commissioned to design the building to attract affluent Kansas City residents. He chose the ornate Italian Renaissance Revival style as a Mediterranean complement to the Spanish/Moorish architectural style of the nascent Country Club Plaza. The building is one of Kansas City's most striking examples of the architectural style. The Villa Serena thrived through most of the 1960s before time and wear took its toll.

The decaying building was purchased by the J.C. Nichols Company, developer of the Country Club Plaza, in 1974 to be repurposed as a hotel to accommodate national and international travelers attracted by this unique shopping destination. The property was reborn The Raphael on September 8, 1975 following a renovation that preserved its architectural and historical virtues. Among its landmark features are hand-made wrought iron gates, twin watchtowers atop its red-tiled roof and twin canopies adorning the entrance to the hotel. The Raphael's intimate lobby recalled the graciousness of a bygone era with its mahogany-paneled ceiling and ornate woodwork and travertine marble floors restored to their original condition. Spaces not considered historically significant were remodeled to accommodate the needs of contemporary travelers. The Raphael's immediate and enduring success placed it in a pioneering role in establishing two niche categories in the United States: the boutique hotel and the all-suite hotel.

The Raphael was purchased in 1989 by The Raphael Hotel Group, owned and operated by Philip Pistilli, the boutique hotel's founder, and members of his family. The popular and critically acclaimed boutique hotel was purchased in July, 2005 by Lighthouse Properties, the hotel and hospitality management company owned by the Walker family of Salina, Kansas. In 2006, management began the most extensive restoration of the property since its 1975 conversion. The project was completed in December 2009 at a cost greater than the building's original development and construction cost. The renovation included new plumbing, heating, and features and fixtures; completely new guest room decor, including carpet, beds and bedding, furniture, art and amenities; refurbished corridors; the addition of a new fitness center and a 24-hour business center; restoration and enhancements to the lobby; and refinements to the patio. Today, under the stewardship of Lighthouse Properties, The Raphael continues a legacy of innovation and preservation. It continues to draw the favor of the traveling public, remaining among the city's most popular and highest awarded ventilation, cooling and wiring throughout; new construction in guest rooms, including new bathroom hotels. A remodel of the lobby and elevator cabs designed to reflect the hotel's heritage and create a heightened sense of place for guests was completed in January 2011. The hotel affiliated with the Marriott Autograph Collection of independent hotels in February 2011. Tuck pointing to preserve and enhance the historic building's vintage brick façade was completed in May 2011.

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The Raphael History

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Mini-makeovers of the presidential suites and Chaz on the Plaza were completed in 2014.

The Property History and Raphael Timeline

The property itself has borne witness to the city's march of progress since the mid-1800s. Viewed through the eyes of history, the property was destined to be fertile earth for nurturing enterprise.

Late 1800s - early 1900s - In the 1890s, it was purchased as part of a larger parcel by a Swiss immigrant named Swarz who transformed it into a dairy farm. In the early 1900s, dairyman Swarz, whose descendants still operate as dairymen in the region, sold the property. The tract of land now occupied by The Raphael operated as a quarry known as the Lyle Brickyard. The tract was eventually replatted as the Loma Linda subdivision. In 1919 Sunset Hills Garden, a nursery and floral shop, was built on the site. The shop was later moved to Westwood Hills subdivision where it continues to be occupied as a residence today.

1920s - J.C. Nichols purchased the land and platted it as the Loma Linda subdivision. In 1927, the McCandles Building Company purchased three lots and commissioned architect Alonzo Gentry to design luxury apartment to harmonize with the Spanish and Mediterranean motifs employed for the nascent Country Club Plaza. Gentry chose the ornate, Italian Renaissance Revival style, popularized in the 1st quarter of the 20th century. In addition to the Villa Serena, the company developed and built the Locarno and the Riviera apartment buildings to the East of the Raphael - both of which were completed in 1929. A curiosity of the Villa Serena is an 8" concrete wall dividing the hotel's two equal wings and that separate entrances were provided for each. Oral tradition is that the two McCandles brothers mistrusted one another to the point the wall was constructed to help resolve any potential future property disputes owned the company. In 1928, the Villa Serena Apartment opens. The building's construction cost was \$600,000, approximately \$7 million in 2009 currency.

1970s - '80s - In 1974, J.C. Nichols Co. purchased the decaying building to repurpose it as an "elegant small hotel." The building was completely renovated. Significant original features were preserved, including millwork and flooring in lobby, and tiles in guest bathrooms. The Raphael opened September 8, 1975. The Raphael's immediate success helped pioneer two now-popular hotel niche categories: the boutique hotel and the all-suite hotel. The success of its sister property on Union Hill in San Francisco played a role in then-investment banker Bill Kimpton deciding to get into the boutique hotel business. In 1989, Philip Pistilli, the hotel's founder, and his family formed The Raphael Hotel Group and purchase The Raphael from the J.C. Nichols Company.

2000s - In 2005, Lighthouse Properties, owned by the Walker family of Salina, Kansas, purchases The Raphael. In 2006, management begins extensive renovation to preserve the hotel's legacy of innovation, quality and tradition into the future. In April 2009, The Raphael is named for the first time to the National Register of Historic Places. In December 2009, the multi-year project concludes at cost greater than the building's original cost in today's currency. In January 2011, a second renovation of the historic lobby, elevator cabs and Chaz kitchen is completed. In February 2011, The Raphael affiliates with the Marriott Autograph Collection, a portfolio of distinctive, independent hotels and resorts. In 2012, Chaz receives Wine Spectator Award of Excellence for the first time. In 2013, The Raphael received a Forbes Four Star award and Chaz on the Plaza received a Forbes Recommended award.

The Raphael History

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The Raphael Tidbits

From his studio in Carrara, Italy, sculptor Bernard Zuckermann created “The Boy with The Thorn” statue standing sentinel in the hotel courtyard. The white marble statue set upon an onyx-veined Tuscan travertine marble base is a heroic-size replica of the original figure in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy. The sculpture was installed in the landscaped courtyard of The Raphael in 1976 and is considered one of the Country Club Plaza’s notable works of art.

The Raphael’s alphabet-spanning guest list of luminaries extends from Ed Asner to Frank Zappa. In between are represented a wide array of notables from business, entertainment, industry, media, political, science and sports arenas.

The space currently housing Chaz on the Plaza operated as a beauty salon from 1935 - 1974. Michael’s Salon of Beauty was where one long-time guest received her prom hairdo in the late-1950s and returned to the same spot two decades later for a first date with her eventual husband.

The Villa Serena opening rates were from \$70 per month and included maid and laundry service; The Raphael opening rates were from \$26 per night and included continental breakfast.

Waters from the Country Club Plaza’s devastating 1977 flood flowed into the restaurant and lower level areas causing power outage and the need to relocate guests to other hotels in the area.

One of the most dramatic pieces of art in Chaz is a giclée on canvas created from a photograph of a terra cotta warrior standing guard at the Plaza’s Sister Cities International Bridge. The warrior is one of the lifesize replicas at the bridge representing Emperor Qin Shi Huang’s 6,000-warrior Terra Cotta Army. Created during the Qin Dynasty, 3rd century B.C., the terra cotta army was unearthed in Xi’an, China in 1974 as one of history’s great archeological discoveries. The replicas were a gift to the city by the Xi’an Sister Cities Committee. The giclée, which incorporates an innovative digital imaging technique, commemorates the 20th anniversary of Kansas City’s sister city relationship with Xi’an, established in 1989.

Two commissioned mosaics depicting the Country Club Plaza in its most popular seasons were installed in early spring, 2011 behind the lobby registration desk.