

Denver's Hush Lounge



Tucked under a restaurant in Denver's once-again revitalized Larimer Square, Hush Lounge aspires to an intimacy befitting its moniker. Owners Terry Martin and Michael Olsen label the bar "an atmospheric parlor."

Its opening in February 2004 offered young professionals an alternative to the typical noisy bar. "Our concept was to take a basement space and create a speakeasy," says Martin. "Hush reminds me of an opium den – it's dark with a unique blend of music that no one else features in Denver."

Complementing Hush's acid jazz are the one-of-a-kind fabrications fashioned by Designer Pat Ryan, a Colorado native known for never repeating himself in his commissions. Ryan's goal was to "create a warm, user-friendly environment that is conducive to meeting your friends, hanging out and having a conversation in a unique space."

With all the custom furniture, "People walk in and say, 'I don't know where it came from. I've never seen it in a magazine. It's not Philip Stark, but I love it,'" Ryan adds.

Boutique Size It

Hush's origins owe much to the owners' familiarity with nightclubs all over the world. The telecommunications professionals have visited bars in Singapore, Hong Kong, London, Paris and Barcelona and have had a financial interest in other lounges.

"London is popular for its really big clubs, but the trend is toward boutique lounges with one-fifth the space in the basements of high-end restaurants," says Martin. "This hasn't caught on in the United States, but we thought it could work in Denver."



The partners envisioned an upscale, boutique lounge that would target 27- to 40-year-olds. "One of the reasons we opened this club was because we didn't have any place to go out in Denver," says Martin. "This is a small town with a young demographic. We tailored our décor for people who were not afraid of something unique or of spending more for drinks."

Shopping around for an appropriate space, the proprietors also were on the lookout for a designer. "We saw Pat's work all over town," says Martin. "He never took the same mold and replicated it."

Their interest led to a meeting with Ryan and artists at Goog, a design firm he had launched 10 years earlier. "Terry and Michael were very club savvy and sophisticated about what they wanted," says Ryan. "We chatted about possible motifs and arrived at what they were trying to achieve." After Goog disbanded, Ryan kept the project going.

From Brouhaha to Bliss

Ryan acknowledges that the location had design challenges that no one had predicted. The 3,200-square-foot space was located in the basement of a Victorian building with exposed rock walls and an uneven concrete floor.

"When Ted's Montana Grill had moved into the area above, they had thrown all their plumbing and HVAC lines into the basement," says Ryan. "We were dealing with a space that looked like something from the movie 'Alien.'"



Through it all, Ryan kept his vision of a nightclub that would eschew trendiness while offering a distinctive experience. Hush's red rock walls and dark color palette create an inviting lounge.

Up to Code

The first challenge was to get the basement zoned for assembly use. Because of the building's historical significance, the owners were able to get a reprieve on some of the stricter codes, such as those that would have required tearing the building apart to add elevator accessibility.

"We still had to put in all new electrical and plumbing systems and cut through the floor to put in drains for the bar," says Ryan. "There was a huge amount of preliminary core and shell work."

The owners hired a general contractor whose responsibility was to provide a finished product in terms of drywall, electricity and plumbing and a blank slate for Ryan's designs. An architect formalized the rough floor plans into usable construction drawings.

Benjamin Moore & Co. to the Rescue

Because the construction was done under a working restaurant, Ryan had to ensure that no chemical smells affected the patrons' eating experience. "We had to prevent Ted's from smelling anything that might affect their business, whether it was while they were open or from lingering fumes," he says.

To avoid problems that had occurred when the flooring was put down, painters applied Benjamin Moore® EcoSpec® Primer after 11 p.m. "We discovered that Benjamin Moore was great," Ryan reports. "Literally within two hours of applying it, there was no smell. When we showed up at six o'clock the next morning, it was as if the place had been painted for three weeks."

Cozy colors

Ryan chose a dark color palette of browns, deep blues and grays on the drywall but left some of the original red rock exposed and uplighted. "In a club environment, maintenance is key, so we chose Benjamin Moore® Regal® Matte Finish because it was washable and looked good," Ryan says.

Ryan applied a micro topping to the concrete floor to level it and covered it with a charcoal-colored concrete surface, which was blacked to a dark gloss. Stock rugs tie in with the wall colors and warm the space.

The couches in the primary seating area face a 19-foot fireplace made from a steel frame and covered with warm gray concrete panels polished to a glass-like finish. When the city would not allow a gas fireplace because of venting concerns, Ryan reworked the original idea to dramatic effect. "We created a waterfall that runs down the back of the fire box," says Ryan. "In front are 200 candles that are reflected in the water."

Bathroom Buzz

Martin discovered in London that "the more outrageous the bathrooms, the more buzz the boutique bars were getting." Hoping to create a similar buzz for Hush, the owners chose a unisex bathroom, a first for Denver.

"This was a great way of saving space," says Ryan. "Instead of the required four toilets for women and two toilets and two urinals for men, we put eight toilets in individual stalls in a semi-circular room in the back of the club."

The stalls are individual rooms that provide privacy for the users. Each stall has its own stereo system that plays soundtracks from such movies as "Pulp Fiction" and "The Big Lebowski."



The Hush Experience

Despite the bathroom buzz, Martin hopes to keep Hush low key. The entrance sits under an unobtrusive black awning with only an 8-inch crescent moon design. The lounge does not advertise and turns people away when the space begins to feel crowded.

While a DJ plays danceable tunes, the emphasis is more on listening to the music. "We're trying to create an atmosphere that is a lot like relaxing at a friend's house," says Martin. "If you go on the dance floor, the music is loud enough for dancing. Everywhere else you can hear the music but have a conversation without raising your voice."

So what does the future hold for Hush's owners? They plan to open similar boutique lounges in San Diego and Seattle in the next five years. And, after conquering some of the unique design demands surrounding the Denver opening, they'll go into those projects seasoned veterans.

"The design challenge," says Ryan, "was to create a place that's hip but also very welcoming and comfortable. The management challenge is to let people know that they're not on display, and it's okay to sit and chill."

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