

Gala to thank groups who have helped revive landmark North Park hotel

Roger Showley – U-T San Diego, Saturday, October 6, 2012

Squint as you enter the Lafayette Hotel on El Cajon Boulevard in North Park and imagine you're back in the post-World War II San Diego of the 1940s.

Big bands played in the Mississippi Room in the basement. Hollywood stars like Bob Hope, Lana Turner and Ava Gardner stayed there, and big spenders hosted champagne parties for strangers.

Today, the glitzy, glory days are the stuff of scrapbooks. In their place are Zumba classes, foreign guests who found the property on the Internet and huevos rancheros on the breakfast menu in the hotel cafe.



The plantation-style Lafayette Hotel on El Cajon Boulevard has undergone a \$6 million renovation. Gerald McClard •U-T



The Lafayette's nostalgic look has been updated with features such as flat-screen TVs. Nelvin C. Cepeda •U-T

But after a \$6 million renovation and restoration, facilitated in part by a \$2.4 million forgivable redevelopment loan, owner Jay Wentz is hoping to trumpet the 131-room landmark's charm and chic, just beyond the Southern brick plantation mansion facade.

A gala celebration is set for Thursday, at which Wentz will thank more than 50 organizations and individuals who have helped revive the property since he bought it in 2005.

"It was a collaboration of city fathers, the community and a development team that wouldn't quit that really yielded what we have to celebrate," Wentz said. "The net result is that we have saved a historic community icon that is poised to have great success for decades to come."

Originally called Imig Manor Hotel, the three-story property was developed by Larry Imig, a car dealer and developer, to appeal to high-end guests cruising up and down El Cajon Boulevard, the county's main east-west roadway before the construction of Interstate 8 in Mission Valley.

Conrad Hilton bought the Imig in 1955 and changed its name to Lafayette, apparently in recognition of the Colonial architectural style, and five years later there were reports that much of it would be converted into office space.

Longtime San Diegans know the Lafayette for its band concerts in the Mississippi Room (so-called because the hotel side street is Mississippi) and the still operating Red Fox Steakhouse.

When he bought the property for \$11 million, Wentz, a real estate attorney turned developer, intended on building a high-rise condo annex, but the economic downturn intervened and he proceeded instead with a full-scale renovation.

Crews uncovered and restored the conservatory room's terrazzo floor, period bathroom tile work and the concrete floor in the hotel's cafe.

Nostalgia is big in the Imig Kitchen & Bar (favorably reviewed in Zagat for its huevos rancheros breakfast item), a photo mural of the hotel's past, the period wallpaper and furnishings and Hollywood-themed labels on guest rooms.

Some items were recycled or mixed and matched to create a homey, casual look. Public art includes two murals on the walls of the conservatory, one of a country scene, the other a treatment that makes the wall look like it's been dinged and distressed, when in fact it's just as the French term "trompe l'oeil" says, a trick of the eye.

"We're trying to be smart with the dollars we had," Wentz said.

But all is not old and yesteryear. The makeover brought in flat-screen TVs, a workout room with treadmills, stairsteppers, and free weights (and Saturday Zumba classes), and some environmentally sustainable features, particularly eight fuel cells to convert natural gas into electricity and heat the pool (designed by "Tarzan" star Johnny Weissmuller and used by Florence Chadwick before she swam the English Channel in 1951).

"You can't be a knowledgeable citizen without taking into account all the environmental issues we're facing," Wentz said.

Lafayette Hotel reimagined – Key consultants:

John Grady, Monfric Inc., contractor; **Arcadia Group**, architects; **Tara Hammacher** of Historic Consultants and **Wendy Tinsley Becker** of Urban Preservation & Planning, historic consultants; **Razvi Design**, interior design; **Quintero Landscaping**



The main lobby of the Lafayette Hotel has a mural of historic views. Hollywood stars like Bob Hope and Ava Gardner once stayed at the hotel. Nelvin C. Cepeda •U-T



Imig Manor Hotel, now the Lafayette, featured a big pool designed by Johnny Weismuller, star of "Tarzan" movies. LAFAYETTE HOTEL



The Lafayette Hotel's basement Mississippi Room, complete with bandshell (retained from 1946 original). Nelvin C. Cepeda •U-T PHOTOS



Lafayette townhouses have some 1940s furniture and wallpaper reproductions.



Nostalgia is big in the The Imig Kitchen restaurant.