

## Interview: BD Hotels

Alia Akkam and Stacy Shoemaker Rauhen • May 30, 2017



In the mid-1980s, Ira Drukier and Richard Born abandoned their careers—Drukier was an electrical engineer with a penchant for microwave transistors, and Born was in the midst of a surgical residency—to join forces and acquire, own, and develop New York hotels. Motivated by their fathers, longtime partners in the real estate business, the two launched their own empire with a modest Howard Johnson at Newark Airport in New Jersey.



Ira Drukier and Richard Born, founders of BD Hotels, at Pod 39's rooftop lounge

 [Photos: Recent Projects](#)

Today, Drukier and Born are the largest independent hotel owners in the city, with 26 properties open and operating in their BD Hotels portfolio and three more under construction, including a renovation of New York's fabled Hotel Chelsea. Some of the names, including the Mercer, the Bowery, and the

Maritime, are icons of style. Others, such as the Greenwich in Tribeca and the East Village's Ludlow, have an especially strong cult following among film industry folks and musicians. The Jane and the Pod hotels fashionably reimagine minimalism, while Hotel Metro and the Blakely infuse chaotic Midtown with understated grace. Condominiums, like the modernist Richard Meier-designed towers in the West Village, also reveal Drukier and Born's flair for luxury residential.

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### **Defining Boutique**

When they started out, boutique hotels were in their infancy, recalls Born. "There were independent hotels—some were nice and some were less nice—but the idea of creating specific environments for specific clientele is something that's still evolving over our last 30 years of work."

For Drukier and Born, the boutique concept initially began to take shape at the Hotel Elysée, the Midtown mainstay best known for the Monkey Bar. During its revamp in the early '90s, "we gradually took a look at changing the idea of what a hotel should be and started buying into the thought of making this one have a French feel, with colors and finishes to match. Each one we did from that point forward became more directed—targeted at the people we were trying to have stay with us," explains Drukier.

Things took an especially momentous turn in 1998 when the duo collaborated with hotelier André Balazs to open the 75-room, loft-inspired Mercer, designed by Christian Liaigre, in SoHo. Setting their sights on an influx downtown showed tremendous vision and kicked off a range of high-profile affiliations with a cast of influencers, including actor Robert De Niro, hotelier and creative mastermind Sean MacPherson, and conservationist Eric Goode, for future developments.

"I just walked through the Mercer yesterday, and in our 19th year, we're still on top of our game," says Born. "When I see the things we've done and how old they are at this point, how they are still current and up-to-date is pretty remarkable." Highlighting classic materials that "feel comfortable and as though they've always been there" is one way they help conjure timeless properties, adds Drukier. "Rather than granite, we use marble. Marble ages, granite doesn't. It just makes it feel warmer over time. They are subtle things, but people react to them."

### **Market Drivers**

Although a number of BD Hotels have emerged as hotspots, such status is never the intent. Rather, Born and Drukier seek out interesting opportunities, whether it's a distinctly situated building or, as Born describes it, "somebody else's disaster that we end up picking up." They also have a knack for assigning the property the right level in the marketplace. There are \$1,000 guestrooms at the Greenwich, but cabins at the Jane can be under \$100 a night. For the duo, it's about bringing A-list hotels to highly sought-after locations—a key to their success.

Tailoring each hotel to the right audience is also essential. While the Marlton is a cozy Greenwich Village retreat, the Bowery and the Ludlow are energetic with buzzing lobby scenes. The more subdued Greenwich property resonates with celebrities who seek privacy outside the confines of their guestrooms. "We have a private drawing room in the back of the lobby that is reserved for guests, and it's quiet and sedate. You can be up for three Oscars and nobody bothers you," says Born.

These different cultural niches are all tied together by top-notch hospitality. "The one comment we get from every hotel is, 'You have the nicest people working there,'" adds Born. "That really sets the tone. I have this saying, 'I'd rather you be nice and goofy than professional and cold.'"

Many hoteliers capture a neighborhood's spirit in their lobbies, bars, and guestrooms, but Drukier and

Born are often able to transform a locale's vibe merely with the presence of their properties. In 2003, the Maritime Hotel made its debut in the sleepy limbo between the West Village and Chelsea that never hinted at the forthcoming Meatpacking District boom. Now it lives on the edge of the nightlife and shopping haven, across the street from Chelsea Market, and recently received a refresh by MacPherson (who also designed the Bowery, Ludlow, and the Jane). Meanwhile, in 2007, the Bowery's underdeveloped location was what was attractive to Born and Drukier. "[We felt it] would work the other way around—that the hotel we provide and the restaurant and the life around it would make it a better-feeling neighborhood," explains Drukier. "Over the years, if you look at our projects, you'll see that many are not found in what was considered great locations." Taking gambles on such ambitious environs, adds Born, is only possible because the two drive these hotels themselves. Without "checking the boxes of partners, brokers, and lenders," they don't have to abide by the status quo.

### **Culinary Curators**

Along with maintaining design relevance, BD Hotels has thrived on strong chef relationships. Jean-Georges Vongerichten was ensconced uptown when the Mercer came calling, and heading to SoHo to cook in a basement restaurant was then considered a bold move. It's a formula that still works for the ace chef, with Mercer Kitchen remaining an impressive reservation. "Very few 22-year-old restaurants do what it did 20 years ago in terms of income, but it's still strong," Drukier points out. "If you look through almost all of our hotels, there's a restaurateur there who has a long history of doing a good job." Consider Andrew Carmellini at the Greenwich, or April Bloomfield and Ken Friedman at the Pod hotels.

Friedman and Bloomfield will also be part of the soon-to-open Pod Brooklyn in the heart of Williamsburg with their first non-Manhattan outpost of Salvation Taco. Unlike the Manhattan iterations, Pod 51 and Pod 39, the 249-room Pod Brooklyn stands out because of its modular guestrooms, built in Poland and shipped to the States. They join 10,000 square feet of public space, including rooftops, courtyards, and glass walkways courtesy of local firm Garrison Architects and Pod Hotel design director Vanessa Guilford, who has worked with Drukier and Born since the launch of the Maritime.

### **Unconventional Thinking**

It was 2007 when the two first introduced New Yorkers to the notion of a microhotel with the original Pod 51, a transformation of their struggling Pickwick Arms in Midtown Manhattan. Five years later, Pod 39 arrived (on East 39th Street), and in between there were the affordable cabins found inside the Jane. "One of the things that we could have done was turn the Pickwick Arms into a more conventional hotel, with bigger rooms and private baths. Instead, we said let's take a shot at keeping the configurations where they are and create rooms without bathrooms that people would actually like to stay in—those who want to stay somewhere [nice] in New York, yet not pay the prices that are typically asked for in these kinds of hotels," says Drukier.

Guests eagerly responded and now there are plans for more Pods—one in Times Square, complete with a Parm restaurant and tiki bar by Major Food Group, as well as one in Washington, DC in the shadow of Union Station. The newfound modular approach makes it easier for Pods to be delivered anywhere, with the added boon of developers facing less risk and knowing exactly how much it will cost them. As owners, Drukier and Born also control quality without worrying their names will be attached to shoddy construction.

Most travelers, says Born, are looking for a midmarket hotel that has style, design, and intelligence. The only way to do that "is to sell half the real estate," he says. "It has to be that an enormous amount of people staying in this price point want to have a cleverly designed space that uses high-end

materials and makes them feel current and smart; it's not a small room that's cheap." The Pod embraces products more akin to terrazzo than laminate.

Such unconventional thinking works extremely well for the pair in an industry "with thousands of people looking at things one way, and we're off the sidelines, looking from a completely different perspective," says Born. He and Drukier work out of separate offices—Born at the Wellington Hotel and Drukier at the Elysée—and oversee projects individually, only consulting with each other when an issue arises. "If I have a problem with a project and I'm so absorbed by it, I can call Ira up because I know he has the exact same vested interest that I do, but he's not consumed by the minutiae, and can look back and say, 'Give up on it,' or, 'Just move forward.' Maybe I'm not the guy to buy that big site for an office building, but that quirky little one that someone got in trouble with down on Ludlow Street? We can figure out how to make that work."

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