

# SLEEPER

GLOBAL HOTEL DESIGN

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## Chicago Athletic Association

A Venetian Gothic masterpiece is reborn as Commune's new lifestyle venue

## 1 Hotel South Beach

Barry Sternlicht's environmentally-conscious luxury brand debuts in Miami

## Virgin Hotels

Rockwell Group Europe bring Richard Branson's hotly-anticipated brand to life in Chicago





# Virgin Hotels

CHICAGO

Rockwell Group Europe bring Sir Richard Branson's hotly-anticipated Virgin Hotels brand to life in downtown Chicago.

Words: Eileen Keribar | Photography: © Eric Laignel

Over the decades, lifelong philanthropist and entrepreneur Sir Richard Branson has upheld his characterisation as a wunderkind of re-invention, garnering an enduring respect for the manner with which he revolutionises industries.

When Branson first turned his attention to the travel industry with the launch of Virgin Atlantic in the nineties, he pushed the paradigm with his unequivocally 'Virgin' stamp, delighting travellers with a design and consumer-oriented take on the air travel experience.

Following his more out-of-reach ventures into hospitality, such as the famed Necker Island, a nearly ten-year incubation period has at long last produced the largely accessible Virgin Hotels, designed to attract the same highly-valued business and leisure traveller whose loyalty the brand has captured over the last 25 years.

"It's been a long-held dream to start beautiful, comfortable, fun hotels for guests and give them what they want and need while being gentle on their wallets," Branson had commented at the launch of Virgin Hotels Chicago.

Joining the rapidly expanding hotel scene in the city's Loop, the debut property is housed in the Old Dearborn Bank, an Art Deco landmark designed by Rapp & Rapp Architects in 1928.

The task of creating a new brand, building on Virgin's strong identity whilst crafting a distinct personality, was further challenged by the need to strike a balance between the historical features of the building with Virgin's undeniably contemporary design DNA. The result is a host of modern interventions that respect and brighten the property's historical features, true to brand but not overbearing.

"Design is critical," Branson commented about the hotel's features. "There's just a feeling you get when you walk into a Virgin property. Design is what sets it apart."

Between the statuesque greeter in a bright-red trench coat and the matching Tesla house car that drops guests off within a two-mile radius, a connection to the brand begins outside the property. Inside, restored marble walls, inlaid ceilings and a historical stairway frame the reception desk, once a cigar bar, and are juxtaposed with contemporary Delightfull light fixtures and photos depicting master paintings recreated with stuffed toys.

"There was a series of attributes and dualities that were important touchstones for the design concept," states Diego Gronda, former Creative Director of Rockwell Group Europe, who worked on the project with Virgin's design team. "The hotel had to be warm and







Above: The 210 guestrooms – known as chambers – are designed to a simple palette, punctuated by touches of Virgin red **Previous Page:** Furniture throughout is by the likes of Poltrona Frau, Poliform, and Knoll, while Vaughan Benz also supplied a number of pieces for Two Zero Three

serene, practical and functional, fun and engaging, and energising and innovative. But we tried to avoid doing it all at once, everywhere.”

Key to the hotel’s appeal to both visitors and locals, the property’s street level is dedicated to the creation of a social hub for Chicago’s West Loop neighbourhood. Miss Ricky’s – a reinvented all-American diner – serves a classics-inspired menu in an industrial, contemporary setting. Featuring suspended steel lamps, round booths, penny flooring, Virgin Records memorabilia curated by Kalisher art consultancy, and a British phone booth that serves as the valet stand, the space fuses nods to Americana, the Virgin brand, and its English roots.

Two Zero Three, the hotel’s café, is a cosy space for both work and repose that transitions to a lively wine bar hangout at night. Details such as hooks for handbags and outlets for plugging-in merge with its casual design, featuring a zinc bar, hexagonal ceramic tile flooring, wood accent ceiling and contemporary art.

Venturing upstairs, the original gate to the bank is the portal to the Commons Club, the social heart of the property. A multi-purpose space with loose transitions, it is designed to make guests feel at home

and for locals to mingle in its intentionally private members’ club-like atmosphere, only without the strict door policy.

Cheekily-named areas such as the Shag Room – a circular lounge with shag carpeting – and the Funny Library, with eccentric books that doubles as a business centre, give way to the double-height Commons Bar, a shrine to casual comfort, with its mismatched furniture in social groupings, restored ceiling accentuated by filament pendant lamps, and a free happy-hour every evening.

The Kitchen restaurant is an extension of the bar with an open kitchen serving sharable plates enjoyed from its lounge-like environment with a family-style table overlooking Dearborn Avenue. A 25<sup>th</sup> floor gym and subterranean spa clad in curved wooden beams round out the hotel’s offerings along with the 26<sup>th</sup> floor bar Cerise, designed by Paola Navone. With eclectic furnishings in bold tones, the all-day lounge has an Izakaya-inspired menu and 180-degree views across the city.

Floors 4-24 host 210 ‘chambers’ – calling them guestrooms is like calling the Space Shuttle an aeroplane, says Virgin – as well as 38 one-



Above: A subterranean spa clad in curved wooden beams rounds out the hotel's offering

bedroom suites and two penthouse. Overlooking the Loop, rooms feel decidedly embedded into city life (complete with earplugs for those not accustomed to the clamour of Chicago's 'L' trains) and are accessed through townhouse-inspired front doors.

Guestrooms feel spacious and continue on the themes of comfort and playfulness, with simple palettes punctuated by touches of Virgin red, like the Smeg refrigerators. Rooms are equipped with sliding privacy doors separating the dressing room, with its oversized vanity, generous Poliform closets, separate WC and large shower.

The bedrooms feature patent-pending beds, optimised for comfort and lounging thanks to an ergonomic headboard and erectable footboard that allow for a multitude of positions. A work desk equipped with a custom rotating table doubles as a dining area, complemented by a Poltrona Frau chair and Artemide task light. Entrance carpets by Milliken and custom Maya Romanoff felt wallcoverings add warmth and texture.

As a further boast towards revolutionising the hotel experience, the Virgin team has developed Lucy, a custom concierge app that

accesses everything from early check-in and keycards fed from kiosks at reception, to TV and temperature controls, 24-hour room service, and Netflix streaming. Amenities such as free Wi-Fi, a street-priced minibar and Bluetooth speakers further emphasise a focus on what guests want from a modern hotel.

What ultimately sets Virgin Hotels apart from its competitors bears a striking resemblance to what sets the brand apart in the airline industry. Young and energetic employees complement a spirited, design-oriented environment, and a focus on technology and charm simplify and humanise the experience.

While Virgin Hotels has been billed as a hotel that caters to the female traveller, the result is not overtly feminine but strong considerations are given to the way women travel. It is this balance on the spectrum of function and comfort with attention to a broad range of travellers' desires that will likely ensure success for the brand as it expands into new markets. Properties in New York City, Nashville and Dallas are in development and the brand hopes to have 20 locations open by 2025.

**EXPRESS CHECKOUT:** 250 guestrooms | 3 restaurants | 2 bars | 3 events spaces | Gym, spa | [www.virginhotels.com](http://www.virginhotels.com)  
**Developer:** Lionstone Development | **Operator:** Virgin Hotels | **Architecture:** Booth Hansen; Rapp & Rapp Architects (original)  
**Interior Design:** Rockwell Group Europe; Paola Navone (Cerise) | **Lighting Design:** BOLD