

DOWNTOWN

Rainbow Lounge coming back to Hotel Syracuse

It featured a circular bar, glass-block windows, a terrazzo floor and a "rainbow" of colored lights. The original Rainbow Lounge is making a comeback at the Hotel Syracuse, part of the \$70 million in renovations that are designed to resurrect the former glory of the old hotel's design. This time around, the lounge will serve unescorted women. **B-1**



Bartender John Mura, right, serves a customer in the Rainbow Lounge at the Hotel Syracuse circa 1948.

The Rainbow Lounge in the Hotel Syracuse as it appeared in the 1940s. The hotel's new owner plans to recreate the bar as part of a \$70 million renovation of the hotel. (Onondaga Historical Association)

Marriott
Downtown
Syracuse will
have restored
Rainbow
Lounge

By Rick Moriarty
rmoriarty@syracuse.com

The Rainbow Lounge, the Hotel Syracuse's once popular cocktail bar noted for its art deco design and refusal to serve "unescorted" women, will make a comeback when the historic hotel reopens after a \$70 million restoration.

Owner Ed Riley said the lounge will be rebuilt to the way it looked when it opened on April 8, 1937, four years after the end of Prohibition and 13 years after the hotel opened.

"Our intent is to replicate the room as much as we can," said Riley.

Though the Rainbow Lounge's circular bar and other art deco features will be recreated, the room will not be used as a bar full time. Instead, it will be rented for private parties and serve as "pre-function" space for nearby meeting rooms and the Imperial Ballroom directly above it on the hotel's second floor.

The lounge was a popular hangout for many of Syracuse's elite for decades. Its art deco design, sometimes called art moderne, included a circular bar, glass-block windows and entrance, terrazzo floor and multi-colored lights that gave it its name.

It attracted notoriety in 1967 when Syracuse University student Joan Kennedy sued over the lounge's policy of not serving women who were unescorted by a man. Kennedy lost the case when U.S. District Judge Edmund Port ruled that the Civil Rights



A postcard shows the Rainbow Lounge in the Hotel Syracuse circa 1940s.

Act of 1964 barred discrimination based on race, color, religion and national origin, but not sex.

By 1974, the lounge was renamed the Tack Room. Its circular bar, then approaching 40 years old, was replaced with a rectangular one and its art deco features were stripped away.

"Starting in the 1960s, particularly during urban renewal, anything older was really looked down upon," said Dennis Connors, curator of history for the Onondaga Historical Association. "It was just seen as old-fashioned and out of date."

In 1994, the bar was rebuilt again and renamed Coach Mac's Sports Bar & Grill, following the 1990s trend toward sports-themed bars. The name came from

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What's old
is new



Construction workers walk past the bar in the former Rainbow Lounge in the Hotel Syracuse. The art deco circular bar, a notable feature of the lounge when it opened in 1937, was replaced in the 1970s. (Rick Moriarty / rmoriarty@syracuse.com)

‘For younger people, it’s all brand new’

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former Syracuse University head football coach Dick MacPherson, who lived in a suite in the hotel at the time.

Workers have already demolished Coach Mac’s and uncovered the Rainbow Room’s original terrazzo floor, which had flowing lines and big red circles. The floor was heavily damaged and then covered, but Riley said he’ll save as much of it as he can.

Connors, whose father-in-law, John Mura, worked as a bartender in the Rainbow Lounge, said a return of the art deco look likely will appeal to older people who remember the lounge as well as to a younger generation.

“For younger people, it’s all brand new,” he said.

Riley has the original architectural plans for the Rainbow Lounge, which replaced storefronts along East Onondaga Street. He also has historical photos, so rebuilding it exactly as it looked when it opened in 1937 should be no problem.

And this time, Riley said, women will be welcome — accompanied by a man or not.

The hotel closed in 2004 after years of financial struggles. Riley acquired it with the help of the Syracuse Industrial Development Agency last year and plans to reopen it with 261 fully modern rooms and a historically restored main lobby and function rooms in early 2016.

He recently renamed the hotel Marriott Downtown Syracuse, but he is going to great lengths to restore its many historic features. Riley is hoping those features help draw customers back to the hotel.

“It’s just such a time capsule,” he said.