

Hotel Syracuse's famous Rainbow Lounge to be recreated





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

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on August 04, 2015 at 8:01 AM, updated August 04, 2015 at 9:50 AM

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Syracuse, N.Y. — 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.

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

The new Rainbow Lounge will be rented out for private parties and serve as "pre-function" space for nearby meeting rooms and the Imperial Ballroom above it, Riley said.

When the hotel opened, it had no bar because of Prohibition. After Prohibition ended in 1933, plans were made to convert storefronts along East Onondaga Street to a bar.

Located on the first floor near the hotel's East Onondaga Street entrance, the lounge was a popular hangout for many of Syracuse's elite for decades. It featured a streamlined art deco design, sometimes called art moderne, which included a circular bar, glass-block windows and entrance, terrazzo floor and multi-colored lights that gave it its name.

It attracted notoriety in 1968 when Syracuse University student Joan Kennedy, assisted by Syracuse activist Karen DeCrow, [sued the hotel](#) over the lounge's policy of not serving women who were unescorted by a man.

The hotel won the case when U.S. District Judge Edmund Port ruled that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 barred discrimination based on race, color, religion and national origin, but not gender, and that there was no state action alleged in the lawsuit to invoke the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment of

the Constitution. Within a few years, state law had changed to bar the practice, however.

By 1974, the Rainbow Lounge was renamed the Tack Room. Its circular bar, then approaching 40 years old, was covered up 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 former Syracuse University head football coach Dick MacPherson, who lived in a suite in the hotel at the time.

Crews working on the hotel's restoration have already demolished Coach Mac's and uncovered the Rainbow Room's original terrazzo floor, which featured flowing lines and big red circles. The floor was heavily damaged and then covered by other flooring when Coach Mac's was built, 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 in its glory days, as well as to a younger generation.

"For younger people, it's all brand new," he said.

Riley has historical photos and the original architectural plans for the Rainbow Lounge, so rebuilding it exactly as it looked when it opened in 1937 should be no problem.

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 when it reopens 11 years after its closing.

"It's just such a time capsule," he said.

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