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# Hotel Marcel

## NEW HAVEN

Becker + Becker converts a Marcel Breuer-designed landmark in Connecticut, partnering with Dutch East Design to reimagine the Brutalist building as a Bauhaus-inspired hotel with sustainability at its core.

Words: Ayesha Khan • Photography: © Seamus Payne

Marcel Breuer had the privilege of being one of the most adored students of Walter Gropius, founder of Bauhaus – the German art collective and school that galvanised modern art, design and architecture as we know it. When Gropius fled Germany in 1937, he brought his protégé with him, and together they enjoyed a prolific career in America, teaching at Harvard University and building iconic structures as Germany languished under Nazi rule.

Much like his adored predecessor, Yale-educated architect and developer Bruce Becker compiled his own assemblage of creatives to fulfil a long-held dream: save a Breuer landmark from demolition and re-purpose it into a bustling, burgeoning hotel. “It’s not environmentally responsible to construct new buildings,” says the ardent sustainability advocate. “It seemed like a good project for me, but it was definitely daunting. The difference between building a hotel and an apartment block is like chess and checkers. There are so many things you have to get right for it to work.”

Like Gropius, Becker had his own set of mantras for Hotel Marcel, which sits within Hilton’s Tapestry Collection. The first was to respect and honour the elegantly simplistic design ethos of his predecessors, before surpassing sustainability initiatives – the building is soon to be awarded LEED Platinum status, and is America’s first net zero hotel – becoming a test case for future developments.

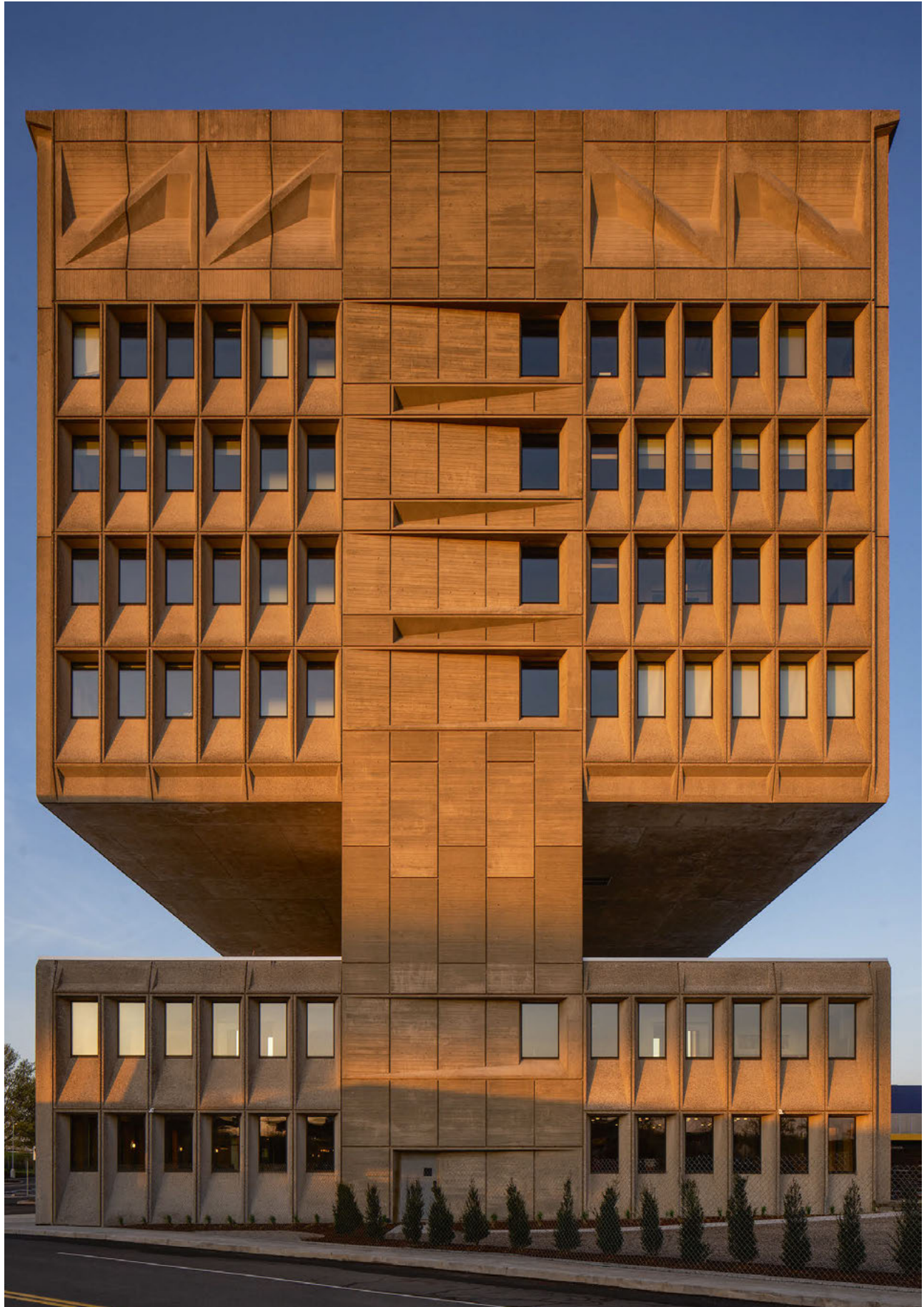
In bringing his vision to life, Becker enlisted the help of Brooklyn-based interiors and branding agency Dutch

East Design. In the short time they were given to mobilise – the firm was first contacted in early 2020 and delivered the project in early 2022 – Dutch East Design planned the hotel’s 165 guestrooms – including a whopping 35 room types – all public spaces and signature restaurant BLDG, for which it also developed the brand identity. Dutch East Design’s modus operandi was to be as responsible as possible in the sourcing and installation of every piece of furniture and fixture that came into their remit. “We were extremely specific in selecting vendors and the materials they used,” explains co-founder Larah Moravek, adding that platforms such as Mindful Materials and Mind Click were a useful resource in assessing the origins of items. “90% of the lighting was custom-designed by us, but we also worked with suppliers like ELA, HB and Rich Brilliant Willing to source fixtures that could be wired for Power over Ethernet,” Moravek adds, referring to the solar-cell-compatible wiring system that was installed in the entire building.

Aesthetically, the strategy was for the interior to be antithetic to the austere modular concrete façade. “When we first came to site, we were very intimidated,” Moravek recalls. “Stepping through the doors, we felt it was important to create a space that was intimate and welcoming. We wanted to carve out a palette that was the softer underbelly to its exoskeleton.”

Retaining the original triangular jet mist granite tiles and stairs of the reception, Dutch East Design complemented the heavy materials with soft, light woods, earthy shades of brown and orange, and soft sheer drapery. In an homage







Dutch East Design’s strategy for the interiors was to be antithetic to the austere concrete façade, using natural woods and an earthy colour palette

to the building’s original materiality, they also added Bauhaus-inspired terracotta tiles to provide warmth.

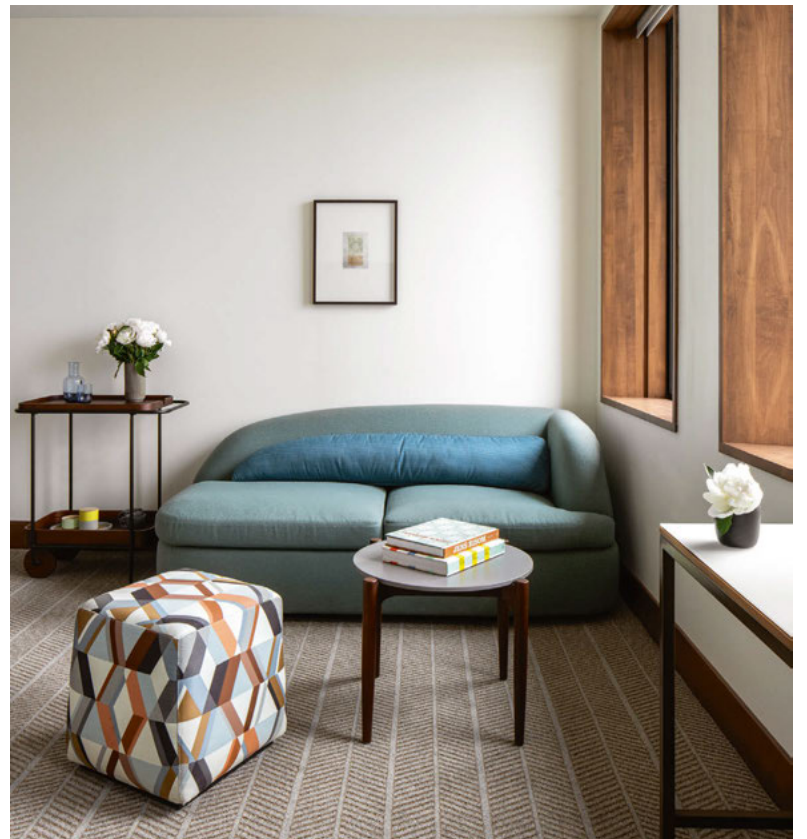
In the sunken lobby lounge and at BLDG, the rigour of the hotel’s Brutalist concrete 5ft-tall window bays suddenly become welcome pops of warmth and light clad in warm oak, while in the guestrooms, the team contended with the narrow 10ft typical room width that the precast window modules dictated, by creating a modular kit of parts. Closets, headboards, side tables and desks are all deftly built-in to give the illusion of space that belies the compact footprint. Each piece of millwork is crafted to a tee, reflecting the same masterful techniques employed by students of the Bauhaus. Breuer’s iconic steel framed Cesca chair is an essential feature of every room, while modern additions come in the form of furniture by Stellar Works and sleek bathroom fittings by Kohler.

Also crucial to the project was Kraemer Sims Becker, Bruce’s wife and a celebrated fine artist. Her mission was to integrate meaningful art pieces into the project as possible, tying infinite threads between the women of the Bauhaus and modern art in America. “The Bauhaus made an unflattering comment about the

women who studied there, saying that they couldn’t understand the third dimension, so they were pushed into two-dimensional works,” Kraemer explains. “I thought, ‘well, wait a minute, these women need to be celebrated!’ Like in many cases with women of that time who were overlooked, it was later discovered that they were doing things like industrial design and furniture design.” In celebration of Anni Albers, perhaps one of the most notable female Bauhaus artists, whose medium was textile, Becker solicited Brooklyn-based quilter Cory Emma Siegler. Tying the sustainability initiative into her work, Siegler produced quilted montages for the guestrooms using old fabric samples donated by Dutch East Design to create Bauhaus-inspired, upcycled works of art. Other notable players in Becker’s symphony of female artists were Celia Johnson – who made a film about women in the Bauhaus – and Howardena Pindell, one of the first black women to receive a Master of Fine Arts degree from Yale.

But perhaps the most valiant task in this great renovation story was Bruce Becker’s ambition to convert the entire 110ft structure’s fossil-fuel-powered









infrastructure to solar energy. “We have a one megawatt-hour battery in the building, which is the equivalent of 15 Tesla batteries,” he says as he opens the door to a room that stores the energy generated by some 1,000 solar panels – more are planned. “We are currently generating about 372kw of energy; the building is actually using 207kw, so this is a net positive day, and it isn’t even noon yet!” he confirms, illustrating the stats through an app on his phone. “It’s more important that buildings be all-electric than net zero, because as the city electrical grids become 100% renewable, your building will be carbon-neutral.” Becker certainly walks the talk; his own home is 100% solar-powered and he even enlisted California-based Maxwell Vehicles to convert a gas-guzzling Dodge Ram shuttle van into a fully functional EV to serve as the hotel’s house car.

For Hilton Worldwide, the project is a major step in its ambitions towards net zero hospitality, whilst adhering to the individual design credentials of Tapestry Collection. Vito

Lotta, Vice President of Architecture & Design at Hilton Global Design Services, explains: “Our collaboration fans the creative flames of our partners to tell a unique story through design and architecture. We are thrilled to partner with such visionary teams to imagine how Marcel Breuer himself might transform this historic building into a hotel in 2022, with an understanding of today’s guests. The preservation of the Brutalist architecture icon and its transformation into a hotel that evokes the spirit of 1969 were essential to preserve the record of Modernist evolution.”

As Becker gets into his brand-new Tesla Model S and drives off onto the adjacent highway, he passes the large concrete block that once stood dark and vacant in a non-descript Ikea parking lot. But it is now his concrete block, shining as a welcoming beacon and a fine example of the forward-thinking, conscientious spirit that once drove Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, and now drives him in a constant crusade to improve architecture.



#### EXPRESS CHECK-OUT

**Owner / Developer:** Bruce Redman  
 Becker, Kraemer Sims Becker  
**Operator:** Hilton Worldwide  
**Architecture:** Becker + Becker  
**Interior Design:** Dutch East Design  
**Lighting Design:** Focus Lighting  
**Procurement:** Canoe Hospitality  
**Main Contractor:** Consigli  
[www.hotelmarcel.com](http://www.hotelmarcel.com)