

Bringing the outdoors inside at Freepoint Hotel

By Linda Laban

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

There is woodland, a reservoir, and a meadow — the latter, Lusitania Field, purposely planted with native wild flowers and resplendent in the summer months with colorful blooms and busy pollinators. This North Cambridge oasis, the Fresh Pond Reserve, isn't on most tourist's to-do lists, but it's certainly a bonus for those who choose to stay at the stylish boutique hotel, Freepoint, a couple of minutes walk away on bustling Alewife Brook Parkway.

Under new owners, and now part of Independent Collection Hotels, Freepoint debuted this spring after extensive renovations transformed it from a Best Western. Really transformed it.

Inside, walls came down, merging what had been an indoor swimming pool into the previously small lobby. Floor-to-ceiling windows and skylights flood the area with light; on the other side of that glass, plantings, fire pits, and seating encourage guests to relax on patio known as the "secret garden." It is only visible from the hotel's interior.

Central to this indoor-outdoor lounge is Freepoint Kitchen and Bar. What was formerly a cramped corner for a quick bite at a tiny counter is now a place to linger a Manhattan and some food, all of which comes courtesy of Manchester-by-the-Sea's Superfine Foods owner/chef Matthew Gaudet. A self-confessed "fan of brown booze," Gaudet's bourbon-forward bar is complimented by a dinner menu that includes grilled cheese with bourbon-marinated bacon, and gravlax cured in Jameson. Breakfast is less whiskey centric, unless you don't want it to be.

Gaudet was challenged to create a working kitchen in a tiny space with no gas or exhaust system. That is, cooking without the normal grill or fryers.

"Working in a kitchen with no gas was a challenge," Gaudet says, "but it's also an opportunity — we're going for

that clean food vibe instead. When people are tired and traveling, they don't always make good food choices. This might help them: They can't just order a burger and fries. We don't have them."

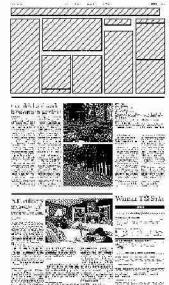
Originally opened as the 46-room Homestead Motor Inn in the early 1960s, and extended with a new wing in the early 1990s, the building's classic midcentury modern vibe is accentuated by the lobby's new indoor/outdoor space, which honors one of the movement's basic tenets: bringing the outdoors inside.

"There is that element to the design, but we opted not to make an homage to midcentury modernism. We wanted to be authentic without recreating the past," says David McCaslin, senior vice president of Philadelphia-based HHM, which owns and oversees Independent Collection Hotels.

Independent Collection Hotels launched in 2007 in Manhattan's Tribeca neighborhood with the Duane Street Hotel, and now includes properties in Brooklyn, Miami, Philadelphia, Santa Barbara, Washington, D.C., and right here in Boston, too: The Boxer in the West End is Freepoint's closest relative. But the Boxer looks very different. Independent Hotels is not a chain in the old sense of the word, and each design honors the building and location. "Purposely, we do not have our hotels copy one another," says McCaslin.

Freepoint's fittings say industry and Cambridge: in the lounge, a room divider made entirely of oars references the annual Head of the Charles Regatta; in the rooms, Living Proof hair products reminds guests that the beauty brand is Cambridge-bred.

Among the many pieces of art and artifacts on display, an original Polaroid camera perched on a bookcase, and a collection of old Polaroid instant photos pinned to a large corkboard, echo the company's Cantabrigian roots. Among the handwritten messages and smiling faces on the nostalgic



Polaroid wall, three stand out: a young Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, and Mindy Kaling, each grinning for separate photos. Just how these seemingly personal Polaroids were sourced will remain a mystery, says McCaslin: “We don’t want to give our secrets away, but we had somebody go find all our different pieces. We had a bit of luck with some of this,” he says, laughing.

Guest rooms are uncluttered. This is where guests sleep, shower in the sleek subway tile-lined bathroom, or enjoy some quiet time. Tech touches include hookups for Google’s Chromecast digital music player, iHome docking stations, and complimentary Wi-Fi. Some rooms have an exposed yel-

low brick wall, a leftover from Tria: It wasn’t a broken look, so it wasn’t fixed.

Freepoint has easy access to Harvard and MIT, and Alewife T Station. The hotel’s free shuttle runs guests around within a two-mile radius, too. As the hotel is dog-friendly, the location near Fresh Pond’s paths is perfect for walks.

FREEPOINT HOTEL

220 Alewife Brook Parkway, Cambridge. Rates starting around \$155. www.freepointhotel.com.

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Floor-to-ceiling windows and skylights lighten up Freepoint’s new expanded lobby.