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An Unlikely Foundation Yields One of Boston's Newest Hot Spots

By Tom Comeau



How does the basement of an upscale hotel and retail shopping gallery that was being used as storage space turn into one of MSN's Top 10 New Bars of 2005? Commodore Builders partnered with

the Foundation Lounge's founder George Lewis Jr. (former proprietor of the 1369 Jazz Club, The Quarterdeck, and 29 Newbury), along with Gensler Architecture, Design and Planning Worldwide, to create this sophisticated night spot.

The Foundation Lounge is literally located in the foundation of the Hotel Commonwealth on 500 Commonwealth Ave. in Boston's Kenmore Square. But this is not your average cement foundation: the 3,300-square-foot build-out now features leather wall panels, exotic

zebra wood, metal ceiling tiles, architectural ceilings, low-perimeter built-in couches, polished marble and colored concrete countertops at the bar and vanity sinks. Even structural steel work was required to provide access to an outdoor café.

Even though it is now heralded as one of the nation's most upscale and posh lounges, the initial stages of the project came with their own unique set of challenges. As is the case with most restaurant and hospitality clients, adherence to a strict deadline was critical for the Foundation Lounge to open for business as scheduled. Obviously, the logistics of the space

posed additional obstacles. This Kenmore Square basement space included: low ceiling heights; minimal street exposure; no direct access to the sidewalk; infringing building foundations; an adjacent subway entrance; and pre-existing mechanical systems. In addition to the structural challenges, the interior design concept involved the fusion of American, European and Japanese styles that required the team to order exotic materials from overseas.

Now that the lounge is complete, it serves as an example to commercial real estate, hospitality and retail insiders of the challenges that Commodore Builders, Gensler Architecture, the Foundation Lounge and other vendors faced to fit a lounge concept into a most unlikely space.

- **Tile Installation:** Veneer marble stone tile for the ceiling above the bar was imported from Italy and despite difficulties getting through customs arrived on site within days before the space was turned over. This required the installation crew to work double shifts for four days. Because the tile was hung from the ceiling, the tiles had to be set and then supported until the epoxy hardened — one by one — before the installation of the next piece.

- **Plumbing and Drain Lines:** This space was not originally intended for restaurant use, so during the first week of construction



The Foundation Lounge, now a trendy destination in Kenmore Square, began as an unfinished hotel basement with low ceilings and no direct street access.

Commodore planned to undertake the task of trenching the floor for the installation of new drain lines. They would soon find out that the as-built drawings were not as accurate as expected and several utilities were located as much as six feet from the documented location. As a result, the concrete cutting saw sliced through the low voltage lines that controlled the hotel's elevator twice. Commodore and the hotel worked together to quickly get new communication lines in place to minimize disruption to the hotel guests. Due to the location of these existing control wires and other utilities, the team was ultimately forced to excavate new trenches for the drain lines.

- **Stone Bar Tops:** Due to the custom layout of the bar the supplier of the stone bar tops was unable to manufacture them in advance of the bar walls, which left limited time for their installation. The colored concrete required four weeks to cure, leaving no room for mis-

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takes. The installation became even more difficult when the installer was suddenly hospitalized (Despite that challenge, he showed up for the installation). Also, one of the tops shattered during delivery and another 10-foot piece broke. To combat these problems, field repairs were made while another piece was poured. A temporary top was also made in four days to replace the piece that was shattered en route allowing all permanent stone pieces to be in place for the opening.

- **Faucets:** The client specifically wanted an automatic faucet with a stainless steel gooseneck, however budgetary and scheduling constraints limited the faucet options. Nonetheless, an assistant project manager expanded his search to include overseas suppliers, and located a faucet made in Germany that fit both the budget and schedule. The bathroom walls remained open until the last week of construction to allow for the installation of this specific faucet.

- **Zebra Wood Panels:** Zebra wood is both rare and expensive. It is also a difficult wood to cut without burning the material, and its hardness and distinct grain lines make it difficult to create wide panels that run the grain vertically to appear seamless. To combat this problem, the team installed panels on a special Z clip that allowed them to make adjustments while the panel was on the wall and achieve the best floor to ceiling fit. This Zebra wood wall creates an impressive backdrop for the bar line and a unique first impression for those entering from the outside café into the Foundation Lounge.

- **Wood Floor:** The wood floor is specially engineered by Gammapar, and has a longer life than a typical home wood floor. But the floor presented additional complications during installation. While the nosing on a generic floor can be either cut or shaved, the sides of an engineered wood floor are unfinished, so five days were allocated just to finish the stairs alone.

- **Unleveled Floor:** The unevenness of this existing

basement concrete slab posed problems for the installation impacting the bar dye and leather walls, in addition to the furniture. To help remedy the problem, the team utilized self leveling floor preparation materials where possible and custom leveling legs for the furniture, which placed items on a level plane.

- **Light Fixtures:** The lounge's unique materials are enhanced by a state of the art lighting system that helps create a specific atmosphere. This lighting system controls over fifteen different types of light fixtures, which can create different lighting scenes within the lounge. Given the low ceiling height of the existing space the team was challenged throughout the planning and construction of the project to make all these unique light fixtures fit within the space. One particular light fixture was reworked on site to account for cove and ceiling constraints; the ceiling has more than a dozen different heights.

Rather than being limited by

the characteristics of this unusual space, the team was able to capitalize upon them to overcome site challenges to provide the desired look and feel. Where the foundations of the existing building infringed on the space, a raised platform now creates a dramatic entrance, with a bridge connecting the entry and main lounge. Textures, colors, and patterns, such as recessed lights, plaster, stone and metal tile surfaces, enhance the unique characteristics of the existing space. Almost a year after the completion of the interior renovation, there is no sign of that original basement storage space. This lounge is truly built on a solid foundation. ■



Creating the Foundation Lounge required steel work, installing new drain lines and decorating with stone bar tops, zebra wood panels and specially engineered wood floors.

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