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QUAINT GOES UPMARKET

Nantucket's historic inns try to preserve the charm while replacing dated decor with posh, modern amenities for a more demanding clientele

By Casey Ross

GLOBE STAFF

NANTUCKET — A rare change is sweeping through this island's historic inns.

At 76 Main, a former sea captain's residence, new owners have replaced the dark wood paneling with bright decor and iPads in every guest room. A few streets away, the Nantucket Hotel and Resort has opened two new swimming pools and now offers beach yoga.

And the White Elephant resort has added a sleek lobby and dozens of new suites, including one room above the island's old five-and-dime store that goes for up to \$3,900 a night and comes with use of a BMW.

A burst of real estate investment is infusing high-end modern amenities into the lodgings of an island that has always cloaked itself in the carefully preserved ambience of the past. Nantucket's old inns — while still covered in cedar shingles and white clapboard — are being refitted with marble baths, zillion thread-count sheets, and spa services that cater to a posh clientele.

"For better or for worse, Nantucket is becoming more and more sophisticated, and the people that are coming to the island have higher expectations," said Bruce Percelay, owner of the inn at 76 Main. "Our goal here is to create a graceful blend of the very old and the very new."

Percelay and his wife, Elisabeth, completed a months-long renovation of 76 Main this year. Now the couple is beginning an overhaul of the former Nesbitt Inn, a dilapidated high Victorian they intend to restore and upgrade with glass-tiled showers, a juice bar, and an outdoor courtyard with a fire pit.

More than a half-dozen inns have been constructed or renovated in recent years, including

the Chapman House, Centerboard Inn, and Gate House Inn. With the upgrades come higher rooms prices and wealthier clientele. But in a place where vacationing is already expensive, the chief concern is about striking the right aesthetic balance between history and 21st-century comfort.

"People want the modern amenities, but they don't want it splashed at them," said PJ Martin Smith, executive director of the Nantucket Island Chamber of Commerce. "There is a balance. But I think people have been careful to maintain the historical integrity of these buildings."

Settled in the mid-1600s, Nantucket once generated extreme wealth as the epicenter of the world's whaling industry. That past remains embedded in everything here — from the carefully preserved sea captain's houses to a Main Street paved with stones once used as ballast in the whaling ships.

Some inn owners still trade on a direct link to that history. For instance, the Barnacle Inn, built in the 1920s, is named after a whaling ship. Owners Phil and Suzie Kiendl have labored to preserve many of the 1920 building's fixtures, such as the original shutters and brass door knockers. Kiendl, who offers rooms for between \$140 and \$525 a day in peak season, said he welcomes the investment in surrounding properties that are charging two and three times as much. If anything, he said, it helps him market his inn to visitors looking for more affordable accommodations.

"A lot of people come to the island on a budget," he said. "They don't all need a flat screen in their room. They're looking to economize a little, and we can fill that niche."

Heather Sheldon, owner of the Carlisle House Inn, said she has made plenty of upgrades to her property, but seeks to retain the sense of individuality she considers a defining characteristic of Nantucket. "My guests are getting an authentic experience being in a whaling captain's home," she said. "With a historic property, you're always updating, but you want to retain that authentic feel."

Newton developer Stephen Karp, by far the largest investor in the island's hotel business, has accumulated several inns and a large portfolio of retail properties over the last 25 years. His biggest lodging property, the White Elephant Village, has expanded from a single hotel to a full-scale resort with rental residences and a new inn.

The inn's lobby features Ikat upholstery fabric, a three-dimensional dory sculpture, and a tiled gas fireplace. Executives with Karp's firm, New England Development, said the updates are meant to cater to a rapidly changing clientele on the island.

"The quality they're expecting and the level of service is above and beyond what was there 15 years ago," said Douglass Karp, son of Stephen Karp and a principal at New England Development.

On Nantucket, any amount of change — from a new shop to

a multimillion-dollar renovation — can stir intense debate among residents and repeat visitors. The island's historical commission regulates development down to paint colors and shingle type. Large retail chains are banned from opening in its commercial center. (That regulation was spurred after Ralph Lauren opened a store in 2005.)

Percelay, the owner of 76 Main, says he is acutely aware of that sensitivity. He owns a home on the island, directed construction of its whaling museum, and is also publisher of Nantucket Magazine. His development firm, the Mount Vernon Co., specializes in multi-family residential development in Boston and recently built Allston's Green District, a 500-unit apartment community designed to provide energy-efficient residences for young professionals and families.

He said his renovation efforts on Nantucket started as an enjoyable side project — a chance to rehabilitate badly dated properties to fill a gap in the island's hospitality market. The inn at 76 Main required the restoration of 150-year-old pine floors as well as repairs to hand-carved woodwork.

The Nesbitt, which Percelay plans to rename 21 Broad, will undergo a costly and complicated rehabilitation of its own. Even repairs to the building's plaster will require the use of limestone because that was the material originally used.

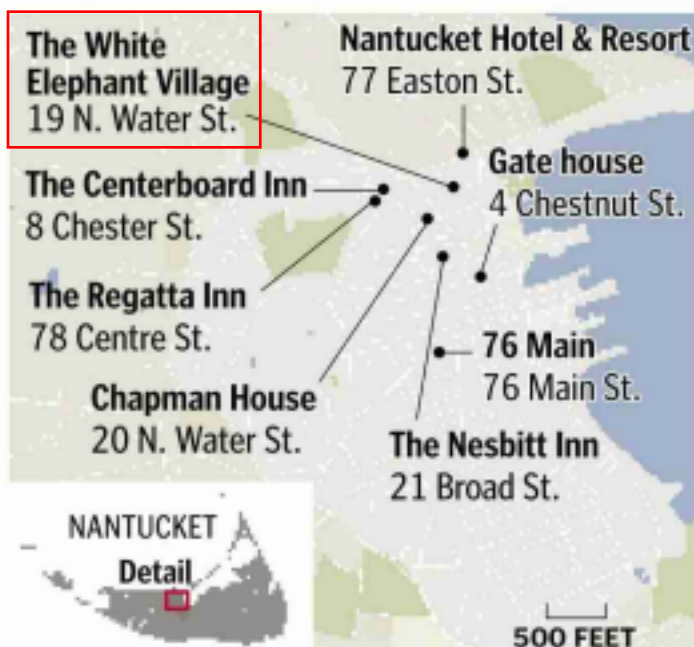
Percelay said the inn will be designated on the National Register of Historic Places, but it will also be designed to wow guests with its spa services, multiple lounges, and Apple TV and iPads in every room.

"We want people to walk in, pause, and say, 'This is spectacular,'" he said. "I guess our feeling is that if we do the right

thing in a big way, then the right thing will come back to us."

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NEW/REHABBED INNS IN NANTUCKET



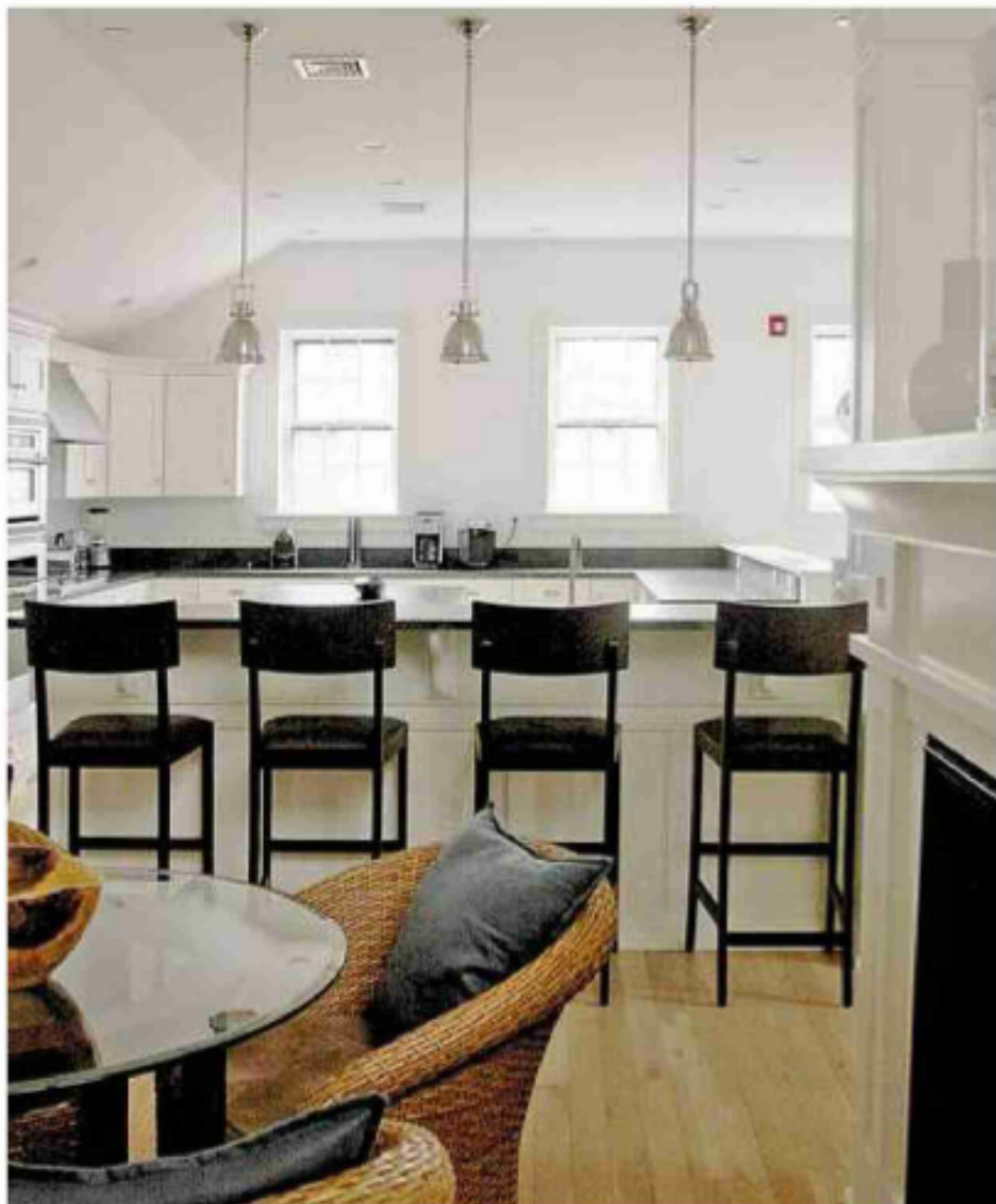
PATRICK GARVIN/GLOBE STAFF



MID-RANGE AND MOST EXPENSIVE ROOM RATES FOR JUNE 27:

76 MAIN ▲ Owner Bruce Percelay

\$399 (Main House, queen-size bed) | **\$529** (Guest House with king-size bed)



WHITE ELEPHANT ▲ Loft kitchen area

\$1,110 (1-bedroom suite) | **\$3,350** (3-bedroom loft)



The posh White Elephant Village has expanded from a single hotel to a full-scale resort; the lobby features high-end furniture and finishes. At left, the recently refurbished 76 Main features bright decor and iPads in every guest room.