

# The renovated Vendue will be the city's first art hotel

## The French Quarter's Artbeat

By [Elizabeth Pandolfi](#)



Robert Lange and his wife Megan will direct the Vendue's art program, curating exhibitions two to three times per year

If downtown's Vendue Inn was known for anything in recent years, it was the Rooftop, the hotel's insanely popular rooftop bar that was regularly packed to capacity on weekend nights and drew in everyone from locals who liked to party hardy to tourists just passing through. The inn itself was nice, but it really wasn't any different from every other historic inn in Charleston — the rooms were small and charming, the lobby blandly gracious, the hotel restaurant impressive but not particularly memorable.

But that's all changing. Jon and Lisa Weitz, owners of Avocet Hospitality Group, bought the property in December of 2012 and are overhauling not only the inn's physical structure, but its entire *raison d'être*. When the building reopens this spring, it will be a boutique hotel dedicated to celebrating the visual arts. The former Vendue Inn, along with its sister building across the street at 26 Vendue Range, is being rebranded as simply the Vendue and will feature curated exhibitions of contemporary art that span everywhere from the lobby to the in-house coffee shop to the upstairs corridors. "It really is being designed to be a blank canvas," Jon Weitz says. "From the lighting consultants to the interior architecture to the furnishings, everything has been selected and designed relative to making the art the showpiece."

That will be evident from the moment guests enter the building. On the Vendue's first floor, an entryway off of East Bay Street will bring visitors through a series of telescoping arches that visually lead you to a single focal piece of art (the Vendue was originally five separate warehouses, and part of the renovation has involved opening up those dividing walls and exposing the original 1780s brickwork). Also on the first floor will be a sweeping glass wall filled with sculptures, all of which, like the rest of the art in the Vendue, will rotate on a twice- or three-times yearly basis. Even the bathrooms will feature photographs of Charleston alleyways.



Weitz didn't plan on creating an art hotel initially. The impetus for the idea came from Mary Martin of the Mary Martin Gallery, he says. "We were going through the design process with [architecture firm] LS3P and Hill Construction ... and we were saying, 'What are we going to do to differentiate ourselves? What is going to be our calling card? Are we going to be a culinary hotel, a music hotel, a historical hotel?'" Around this same time, Martin called Weitz to see if she could promote her gallery by putting up a piece of art on an easel and some business cards in the hotel lobby. "Honestly, I just kept putting her off," says Weitz. One night after a meeting with the architects, Weitz and his head of construction were talking outside the Vendue. "Then I started to see we're in the French Quarter. There are 72 galleries in Charleston. Spoleto's in Charleston. All these different things are art-related," he continues. "And I happened to pull out my phone and there's an email from Mary Martin. At that point I was like, OK, this art thing — that was when the idea really struck."

And by art, he doesn't mean the bland, typical hotel art that's designed to appeal to everyone. Weitz is serious about making the Vendue a true art destination, and he's brought on local gallery owners Robert and Megan Lange of Robert Lange Studios to run the hotel's creative side. "When Avocet initially approached us we were tentative, feeling as though the project would result in classically beautiful, yet expected art on the walls," says Robert Lange. "Jon made it abundantly clear that he wanted this to be a premier, forward-thinking exhibition space that provoked and engaged its viewers. He has allowed us complete curatorial control."

It's a major undertaking for the Langes, not to mention an unusual one. While art-centric hotels have existed for some time — they're fairly popular in Europe — it's rare to find one that incorporates visual art throughout the whole of the hotel, rather than relegating it to a dedicated gallery space. (The new Grand Bohemian Hotel, which is under construction at Wentworth and Meeting streets, will feature a gallery.) That means that there's an abundance of space to consider, not only in terms of square footage but also in terms of atmosphere and look. What is suitable for a hotel lobby might not work in a coffee shop or in one of the reception rooms across the street at 26 Vendue.

So in addition to a major exhibition every six months, there will be smaller curated collections focusing on a medium like photography or a specific theme. For example, in the hotel's new fine dining restaurant, the Drawing Room (it's replacing The Library), Robert wants to feature pencil sketches, including early sketches of finished works that you'll find elsewhere in the hotel.

The Langes are currently putting together the hotel's first exhibition, which is titled *Charleston: Here, Now* and features 65 pieces by more than 30 artists. Two hundred more works of art will fill the hotel's hallways and spill out across the street into 26 Vendue. The Langes are working with various fine local galleries to find the artwork. "Brainstorming the first exhibition has filled most of Robert's and my days — it's a bit of a dream to be able to pull some of the strongest pieces from different galleries around town to create this first body of work," Megan says. "For now, we've been working with Rebekah Jacob, Mary Martin, and Michael Mitchell, but since each show and theme will be unique, different gallery's artists will be invited for different shows." As far as an overall aesthetic, Robert says, "the work will be progressive, yet rooted in skill and effort."

Weitz plans for the rooftop bar, which will still be called the Rooftop, to be open by April 3, in time for the Cooper River Bridge Run. The rest of the hotel will be open by May 1, which means that it will most likely have no trouble filling its rooms. What better place to stay during Spoleto Festival USA than an art hotel?

But while the tourism benefits of a revamped, boutique hotel in a prime downtown location are clear, this particular hotel is offering more to the city than an economic boost. Thanks to the Langes' focus on simply searching out strong work, regardless of how well-known the artist may be, anyone with art in a local gallery has the chance to be included in a Vendue exhibition — and thereby exposed to buyers from across the country and around the world. "In the future, we hope that all local galleries as well as artists with and without representation in the Charleston art scene have equal ability to submit work for the juried thematic shows," Robert says.

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