

FULL CIRCLE

The Hyatt's Polaris spins again, 22 floors above Downtown

BY RICHARD L. ELDREDGE

FROM THE MOMENT you push the oval Polaris button inside the glass elevator of the Hyatt Regency, the stomach-flipping wonder returns. In nineteen seconds, you're rocketed up the atrium's hanging ivy-accented twenty-two stories, through the roof, and out into the Downtown sky. Then you ascend into the space-pod lounge, hovering 312 feet above the lobby of the forty-seven-year-old hotel.

"It was truly like blasting off," recalls veteran civil rights leader Xernona Clayton. "The first time I rode in it, I was convinced we were going to end up outside!"

Mothballed for a decade, the city's first revolving restaurant, now reimagined by the Johnson Studio, is set to spin anew this spring. And John Portman, the Atlanta architect and developer who created the cobalt-hued rooftop restaurant, couldn't be more pleased.

The Polaris may be an icon, but it started out as an afterthought, dreamed up when four floors of Portman's futuristic hotel had already been erected. The idea came to Portman during a Saturday afternoon shopping trip with his daughter Jana, then in second grade. Portman took Jana by the construction site and told her about the glass capsule elevators that would serve as kinetic artwork for the mammoth lobby.

"But what about the people who don't have rooms here?" Jana asked. "Won't they get to ride the elevators?"

"I couldn't get it out of my mind," Portman remembers nearly fifty years later. "We had been racking our heads about how to get the public more invested, to create a more synergistic space, something that would bring the hotel and the community closer together. We wanted it to be more than just a set of bedrooms."

The following Monday morning, Portman rushed

"We're going to put a rooftop restaurant on this thing." As Steinberg recalls, "It was my job to figure out how to support the thing and ensure it didn't fall down."

Portman faced another dilemma: It wasn't his hotel anymore. His investors had bailed on him after hotel magnate Conrad Hilton had gazed out at the structure underway and proclaimed, "That concrete monster will never fly." The project was off-loaded to the Pritzker family, owner of the Hyatt hotel chain.

Undeterred, Portman made a sketch of a flying saucer-accented hotel, took it to Don and Jack Pritzker, and somehow sold them on the idea. The original price tag for Downtown's future blue night-light? \$600,000. "The key was that John didn't go in as an architect and say, 'Isn't this pretty?'" Steinberg explains. "He went in and told the new owners, 'This will make money for you.'"

Before exiting Steinberg's office that day, Portman threw him and lead architect John Street one last spherical curve ball: The restaurant should revolve.

"Oh, fine," Steinberg responded. "Do we know how to make a restaurant go around?"

Portman's response? "How the hell do I know?"

Working with Portman, Steinberg says, "was never a question of 'Can we do this?' but 'How do we do this?'" So Steinberg and Street flew to Jacksonville to inspect Ember's, a revolving restaurant perched on the eighteenth floor of the Universal Marion Building. They hired the Ember's wizards of rotation, the Connecticut-based Macton Corporation, to create a turntable for the 4,682-square-foot Polaris. While these are called "revolving restaurants," it's actually the floor that rotates. Wheels are attached to the building, a track is on the floor of the restaurant, and a giant turntable helps the track glide over the wheels. It took a motor with just three-quarters of a horsepower to drive the entire thing.

The circular shape owed more to necessity than to



was just the most logical shape," Portman explains. "I said, 'Let's circulate them and have them see all of the city.' The idea was much more interesting to me than something static where you sat for two hours and saw the samething."

Before the Hyatt could welcome guests into Polaris, Portman had to figure out how to get 200 people out of the spaceship in the event of an emergency. In addition to two elevators, the Polaris had just one exit stair. Building codes dictated there be a second. Enter Atlanta building inspector Norman Koplun, who suggested exiting people out of the Polaris, down onto the Hyatt's roof, and into the rooftop exit stair.

The unusual structure also affected restaurant service; to accommodate the space's small kitchen, menu items were readied downstairs, with final prep taking place in the Polaris.

While prime rib was the house special at dinner, cold lunches were a fixture at midday. "We ate a lot of chicken salad sandwiches up there, but no one cared," says Clayton. "You could walk the floor and see the entire city in this big circular saucer. It was thrilling."

Until the Hyatt officially opened in May 1967, it remained unclear whether anyone would even brave the exterior elevator trip up to the restaurant. But once word spread about the cinematic spectacle, lines formed daily just to ride the elevators in the atrium. "There was a spot in the lobby we called the Jesus Christ Corner," recalls Steinberg of the expletive-inspiring view just inside the hotel's entrance.

As an Emory freshman in 1973, A.J. Robinson, now president of Central Atlanta Progress, was sent on a scavenger hunt. "One of the things on the list was, *Get your picture taken with a cocktail waitress at the Polaris.* We had a Polaroid camera with us. It took about eight pictures and cost a fortune. We somehow convinced a cocktail waitress to take a picture with us. I'm pretty certain she just felt sorry for us because we couldn't get into the lounge."

Sam Massell, elected mayor of Atlanta

at in a languishing city center. In 1967, Downtown was in dire need of help. It was deteriorating fast. John Portman changed all that. The vision he had was very dramatic. It was the focal point for taking out-of-town dignitaries, ambassadors, U.S. senators, and movie stars."

Reigning over the skyline, the Polaris was the showiest—and one of the first fully integrated—Downtown hot spots. Clayton's dining companions included Sidney Poitier, Sammy Davis Jr., Harry Belafonte, Gladys Knight, Lena Horne—even the Jackson 5.

Once in, diners still encountered a few learning curves. "I hosted a luncheon at the Polaris; we were halfway through eating when I noticed my purse was gone,"

Clayton says. "And then I noticed all of the other ladies' purses were missing, too. It occurred to us that we had put our purses down next to us. Our handbags had rotated clear across to the other side of the restaurant!" A visit to the restroom represented another challenge. "You would come back from the ladies room and the room was completely changed," says Clayton.

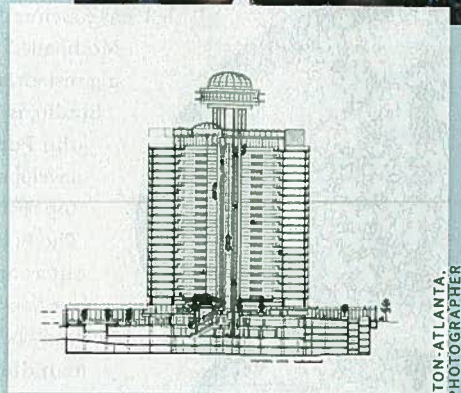
"You had to ask yourself, 'Where in the world was I sitting?'"

Polaris managers noted that while crowds lined up to be seated, diners would linger over dessert and coffee until the restaurant completed a full rotation. The Hyatt experimented, cranking up the restaurant's turntable. Steinberg's office soon received a panicked phone call. "They got that sucker going so fast, you could see the entire city in thirty minutes!" says Steinberg. "They told me, 'People are getting sick!'"

Over the decades, taller buildings have compromised the once-idyllic views from the Polaris. In 1971, the Hilton Atlanta, complete with Nikolai's Roof, a skyline-view fine-dining restaurant, opened just across the street. And in 1977, Portman topped himself with the seventy-three-story Peachtree Plaza Hotel—crowned by the revolving Sun Dial restaurant.

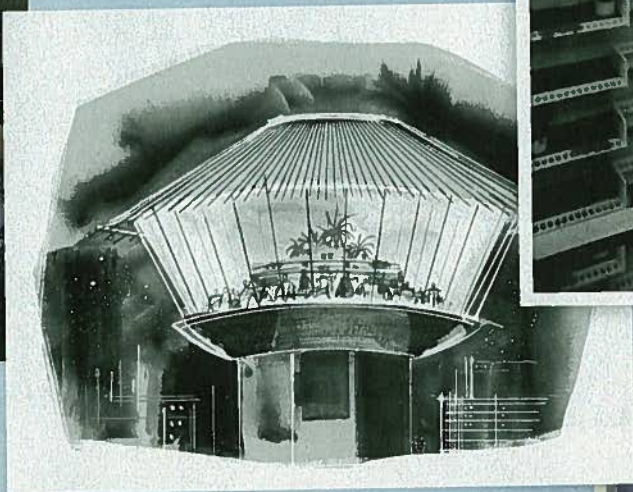
Robinson is thrilled the Polaris

"Whenever anyone would visit, it's where I would take them," says former mayor Sam Massell.



➤ Xernona Clayton, former Southern Christian Leadership Conference worker, recalls one afternoon in the mid-1960s when she and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were thrown out of the Holiday Inn across the street for arranging a luncheon for blacks and whites together. King peered up at the Hyatt and told Clayton, "You know, Xernona, maybe that will be our hotel of hope." Says Clayton: "Not only was the Polaris beautiful, new, and exciting, but it was integrated. They welcomed everybody. We could lunch and visit with each other, regardless of our color. The Hyatt treated black

➔ In the 1970s, diners clamored for Polaris's signature peach daiquiri—served in a frosted cocktail glass adorned with a blue sketch of the hotel and garnished with a Polaris-shaped plastic cocktail stirrer. Portman, right, in 1967, overlooking the twenty-two-story atrium of the Hyatt; his first sketch for the Polaris, below.



MARIO PERALTA AT THE REGENCY



➔ "It was a place we would go when we wanted a special dinner," recalls former mayor Sam Massell of the Polaris. "When I could save up enough money, we ordered the prime rib. It was romantic, especially at night when you could take in the lights of the city." In the 1970s,

PORTMAN: LUDWIG; SKETCH: PORTMAN ARCHIVES, LLC; EXTERIOR: ATT REGENCY ATLANTA COLLECTION; THE PORTMAN ARCHIVES, LLC; EXTERIOR: ATT REGENCY ATLANTA COLLECTION; RECORD: STIRRER: CAROLINE C. KILGORE; PERALTA: LEE/ATLANTA HISTORY CENTER