

Growing where you are planted

by Linda Edgerton

photos by Sara Brennan-Harrell

Dennis Quaintance is poised to achieve GOLD status for the new Proximity Hotel in Greensboro.





what does it mean to build green?

The U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) has developed the Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System™ in an effort to create a standard to improve environmental and economic performance of commercial buildings using established or advanced industry principles, practices, materials and standards. It is intended to be used as a guide for green and sustainable design.

The Proximity Hotel is working to achieve the GOLD certification from the LEED Green Building rating system. In order to meet the GOLD standards, construction and design of the project must include considerations in the following areas:

- Sustainable site
- Water efficiency
- Energy and atmosphere
- Materials and resources
- Indoor environmental quality
- Innovation and design

Want to know more? Visit the U.S. Green Building Council at <http://www.usgbc.org/LEED> or visit the Natural Resources Defense Council at <http://www.nrdc.org/buildinggreen/leed.asp>.

As president of Quaintance-Weaver Restaurants and Hotels, Dennis Quaintance has framed many a visitor's first impressions of the Gate City — from the comfortable elegance of the O.Henry Hotel...to the soaring ceilings and old-world style of the adjoining Green Valley Grill...to the art deco ambiance of Lucky 32.

Though at age 49, Quaintance has achieved more than most business-people will in a lifetime. His energy and enthusiasm are always propelling him toward new challenges.

It should be no surprise, then, that on a Sunday night walk a couple of years back, Quaintance and his wife, Nancy, found themselves "relaxing" by brainstorming ideas for a new breakthrough category in the highly competitive hotel industry.

"Nancy and I were there for the birth of the 'all suites' hotel. We saw it in Phoenix with the Granada Royale Homtel, which became Embassy Suites, and we saw it here in Greensboro with Guest Quarters. We began to talk about whether there were gaps in the market we could fill."

That discussion led to the development of the Proximity Hotel — an eight-story tower now under construction on Green Valley Road in Greensboro, near the intersection of Wendover Avenue and Benjamin Parkway. With a bit of luck, it will be the first in a new category of "loft" hotels that will bring unique, one-of-a-kind charm to an industry dominated by box-like structures. Named after the Proximity Manufacturing Mill established by Greensboro's Caesar

and Moses Cone in the late 1800s, the 147-room facility is intentionally designed to look like an old converted factory, yet built from scratch with modern amenities.

“It’s those authentic architectural features that give you a wonderful tension,” Quaintance said. “You get high ceilings and exposed brickwork paired with classic, modern furnishings.”

Environmentally cool

You also get one of the most energy efficient hotels in the world—meeting or exceeding Gold standards for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

“I believe there are two litmus tests in any business,” Quaintance said as he explained his focus on energy efficiency. “We’ve got to be absolutely loyal to the financial requirements of those who fund our ventures, and we also need to pursue sustainable models. Proximity will use only 40 to 55 percent of the energy of a conventional hotel, but guests will never feel inconvenienced or notice the difference.”

What they will notice is fresh air and abundant light. A sophisticated air exchange system will pull fresh air in and capture energy in the process, while broad expanses of glass will flood the hotel with sunlight. Standard guest rooms will have 50 square feet of windows, while 30 400-square-foot end and corner rooms will have triple that amount.

The combination of fresh air and sunlight is designed to help guests

sleep better and wake up energized. Water will be heated by solar panels, and the hotel will use new high-tech, belt-driven elevators that gather energy during their descent to power cars on the way back up.

Ride the wave

Quaintance’s innovative approach to managing the energy demands of his properties mirrors his advice for handling any tough business issue: ride the wave.

“The key when we face issues isn’t to resist or deflect them, but to ride the wave, figure out the trends and respond,” he said. “That means focusing on negative things positively—determining what’s wrong and reversing the trend.”

Listen to the market

The process used to determine where to bring the Proximity project to life reflects Quaintance’s now legendary attention to detail and planning. (He and Nancy are said to have mocked up a hotel room in a local warehouse before the plans for the O.Henry were finalized – analyzing everything from the comfort of bed pillows to the height of the writing desk.)

“We like redundancy in our market research,” he said. “So we work with an international survey firm to conduct very thorough studies. But we also do our own surveys with feet on the ground, talking to friends and people with local knowledge.”

Taking a comprehensive view helps Quaintance and his team evaluate the

best, worst and most likely supply and demand scenarios for markets under consideration.

“Before we make a decision, we explore the worst thing that can happen on both the supply side and the demand side and see if that is a scenario we know we can survive,” he said. “Mike Weaver (his partner in Quaintance-Weaver) has taught me so much, and that’s advice he shared with me that came from his dad – to always look at the worst thing that can happen.”

Intuition has its place

Quaintance also brings a healthy measure of instinct to the equation.

“We won’t let gut feel make a decision for us,” he said, “but we will let it unmake one.”

For example, we had an O.Henry style hotel planned for Raleigh, and the real estate deal kept falling through. We took that as a signal and started to think about other options that would make sense.”

Fertile soil

The research for the Proximity project explored micro markets in Raleigh, Charlotte and Greensboro, with Greensboro landing on top. Quaintance thinks that outcome is important in more ways than one.

“I believe it’s good to grow where you’re already planted, and an owner’s footprints are good fertilizer,” he said. “So we’re fortunate that the market criteria justified building here in Greensboro. We have a reputation here that we can build on, versus a town like Raleigh where we aren’t



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well-known yet. And by having the O.Henry here, we can share amenity services."

That includes, for example, the O.Henry's distinctive London Taxi for guest transportation. The luxury sedan will be co-branded with the O.Henry and Proximity logos and serve guests at both sites.

Though he is reluctant to predict what might come next, Quaintance hopes that when Proximity opens next year, it will be the first in a chain of sister hotels in major markets throughout the Carolinas.

"This is the first time in my career that I've been involved in planning a business that we intend to expand broadly," he said. "Proximity is designed from the ground up to be taken on the road. Though the economic environment could change, our business model is based on opening seven additional hotels across North Carolina in the next 10 to 12 years."

Quaintance plans to limit that growth to sites within a 200-mile radius of Greensboro, the city where he and his family are "planted."

"I like my life and I'm having fun," he said. "I don't want to over-expand and lose that." ■

Proximity amenities...

- 147 oversized guest rooms with 10 suites
- Harmonious with nature
- Vibrant bistro
- Banqueting space with wonderful vistas
- Inviting lobby bar
- Wi-fi technology
- Expansive fitness studio
- Peaceful gardens
- 2.5 acre natural habitat
- Internet salon
- Opening mid 2007
- Accepting reservations at 336-379-8200