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Hotel Liberty

OFFENBURG

A former prison in Germany's southwest is reborn as a hotel, with original jailhouse features integrated into the new design.

Words: Guy Dittrich | Photography: © Jens Pfisterer / Courtesy of Design Hotels

arrived on a cold, dark November day and the place smelt like a prison," narrates Marc Aeberhard, General Manager of Hotel Liberty in Offenburg, a trading town in one of Germany's wealthiest states. The 38-room property occupies two sturdy buildings designed in 1840 by renowned architect Heinrich Hübsch. Constructed from the same red sandstone that was used for the cathedrals of Freiburg and Strasbourg, they were in penal use until as recently as 2009, and as anticipated, weren't particularly warm or welcoming. "We had to change a place where people wanted out, to somewhere guests want to stay," continues Aeberhard.

Following a successful factory conversion, local businessman Christian Funk was persuaded by the town's mayor to take the two buildings and create a hotel. Initially, that concept was watered down to guesthouse use, but Aeberhard, a veteran of luxury hotel openings including the exclusive Fregate Island Private in the Seychelles, convinced Funk to run with the original plan. The concept and planning was supported by Knoblauch, a studio based in Markdorf on Lake Constance. This initial role was expanded to include the creative and construction management and general contracting responsibilities for the entire hotel. The development



Opposite: Guestrooms occupy former prison cells with vaulted ceilings of exposed brick, accessed via the original cell doors of oak-covered steel

was implemented and completed within just six months. Knoblauch, appointed off the back of a retail project completed in the town, also developed the furnishing concept with much of the furniture custom-made.

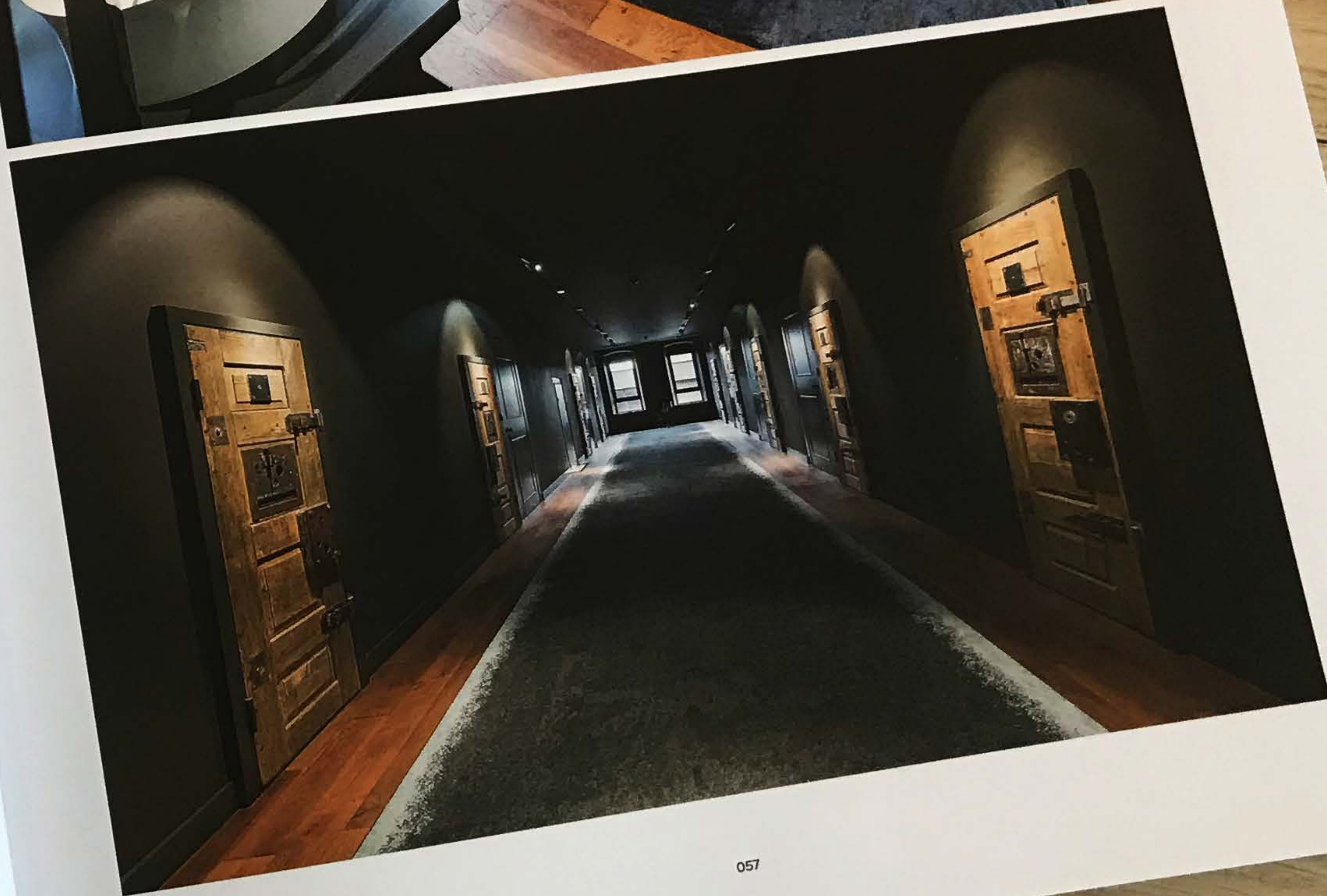
The property has undergone numerous fortifications and renovations over the years, and the key to unlocking its potential has been in the glazed 'bridge-building' that spans the former exercise yard and links the jailhouses. This creates space for the restaurant and lobby. "We call it the glass cube," explains Katja Scharnagel, interior designer at Knoblauch, of this modern counterpart to the historical buildings. Aberhard adds a more poetic view of replacing the heavy with the light to "liberate emotion". Within the cube, amidst the high, barred windows of one former exterior wall, now washed by downlighters emphasising its rough stone texture, is a bright neon message reading 'Liberty is the key to feel... free'.

The connecting structure has concrete floors with six pillars supporting a 12-metre-high ceiling. Within this huge volume are two terraced mezzanines overlooking the main entrance, where the low-slung lounge seating maximises the effect of the spectacular full-height space. The first 'terrace' is a library reached via a staircase, behind which is a tower bookshelf, while the upper level is occupied by a meeting room. The ceiling has a stucco finish to help with the acoustics, but also incorporates heating and cooling elements

by Metawell that, together with automated blinds, contribute to a successful climatic result.

What Hotel Liberty lacks in leisure facilities, it makes up for in F&B with Wasser & Brot – in reference to the restricted diet of the former inmates – a central attraction within this wine-growing region adjacent to the Black Forest. Here, the pièce de résistance is the show kitchen. "The idea of the show kitchen arose from the initial intention to have a steakhouse – assuming that the prisoners, mainly a male, would have loved to have a steak instead of water and bread. This was developed into the concept of a quality restaurant with a show kitchen," explains Scharnagel. The finishing grill of Michelin-starred chef Jeremy Biasiol is topped with a standout, gold-covered ventilation hood. Behind low glass screens, he and his team finish incredible dishes for truly memorable degustation menus prepared in the kitchen below.

Guestrooms occupy two or more former prison cells with vaulted ceilings of exposed brick. These historic parts of the hotel were subject to some restrictions from the heritage authorities – Amt für Denkmalschutz. On each floor, at least one cell door was to be re-used. As the floors had to be raised to allow for services, this means a step down to these particular doors. Many of the other doors have been retained for decorative purposes. At 120kg of oak-covered steel, this was a job not to be taken lightly. Barred windows





Left: Public spaces feature time-worn sofas and distressed leather dining chairs by Scandinavian brands including Norr11, Carl Hansen, Hay and Republic of Fritz Hansen

were also preserved. Permission was given to extend the high windows of the cells vertically downwards, keeping in harmony with the original layout.

Guestrooms themselves are refined with oak floorboards and grey and black colourways. Headboards are black leather. The casework, rugs and drapes, a mélange of greys. Even the bathrooms, behind sliding doors of smoked mirror, get in on this sophisticated look featuring locally manufactured Axor Citterio E collection brassware in a new, special surface finish called Black Chrome. Citterio's subtle mix of the angular and the curved is a further representation of the old and new of Hotel Liberty. Washbasins are from the Axor Urquiola collection and, like the freestanding tubs of larger rooms, their moulded mineral forms echo the buckets and tubs of a time gone-by. Small details such as brass edging, coat hooks and enameled steel beakers accent the rooms.

Hotel Liberty is a simple product of rooms with a restaurant – urbane rooms and an outstanding kitchen. The open, linking space is beautifully juxtaposed to the thick walls and solidity of the guestroom buildings with their cosy and enveloping environments. Unlike the former inmates who couldn't wait to get out, today's guests will find little incentive to leave.

EXPRESS CHECK-OUT: 38 guestrooms | 1 restaurant | 1 bar | 1 meeting room | www.hotel-liberty.de
Owner: Christian Funk Holding; Dietmar Funk | **Investor:** CDF Immobilien | **Operator:** Liberty Betriebsgesellschaft | **Developer:** Trendconcept
Architecture: Knoblauch; Grossmann Group | **Interior Design:** Knoblauch | **Contractors:** Planungsbüro Eichhorn + Engler; CS Planungsbüro

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