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STYLE & DESIGN

First look

Tilman Fertitta's posh Post Oak Hotel greets early visitors

By Diane Cowen

Even as early guests check in and a handful of people relax in H Bar, just off the lobby of the new Post Oak Hotel at Uptown Houston, Tilman Fertitta is still making tweaks to the décor of his newest baby.

He's unrelenting as Sarah Balinskas — her Sarah Balinskas Fine Framing handles some of the city's best art — holds a variety of gold- and silver-leaf frames to the corners of three large-format paintings by famed artist Frank Stella.

Balinskas and her assistant politely hold up one after another without batting an eye — they've worked with tough customers before.

Wearing all black and barely breaking a smile, he grills them on why they like one versus another. Why they'd use a matte or not. And why one painting has a gold matte liner.

"I use that liner to make my cheap stuff look better," Fertitta says, breaking the tension with a mischievous laugh. The Stella needs no gold liner.

Elsewhere in the hotel you'll find artwork by Alex Katz, Robert Motherwell, Friedel Dzubas, Donald Sultan, Howard Hodgkin and Joseph Glasco. Guest rooms feature black-and-white photography.

Houston's most notable self-made billionaire, Fertitta, 60, is known for his vast collection of museum-quality art — he spent millions on new pieces just for the Post Oak, which he hopes will earn a Forbes Travel Guide five-star rating.

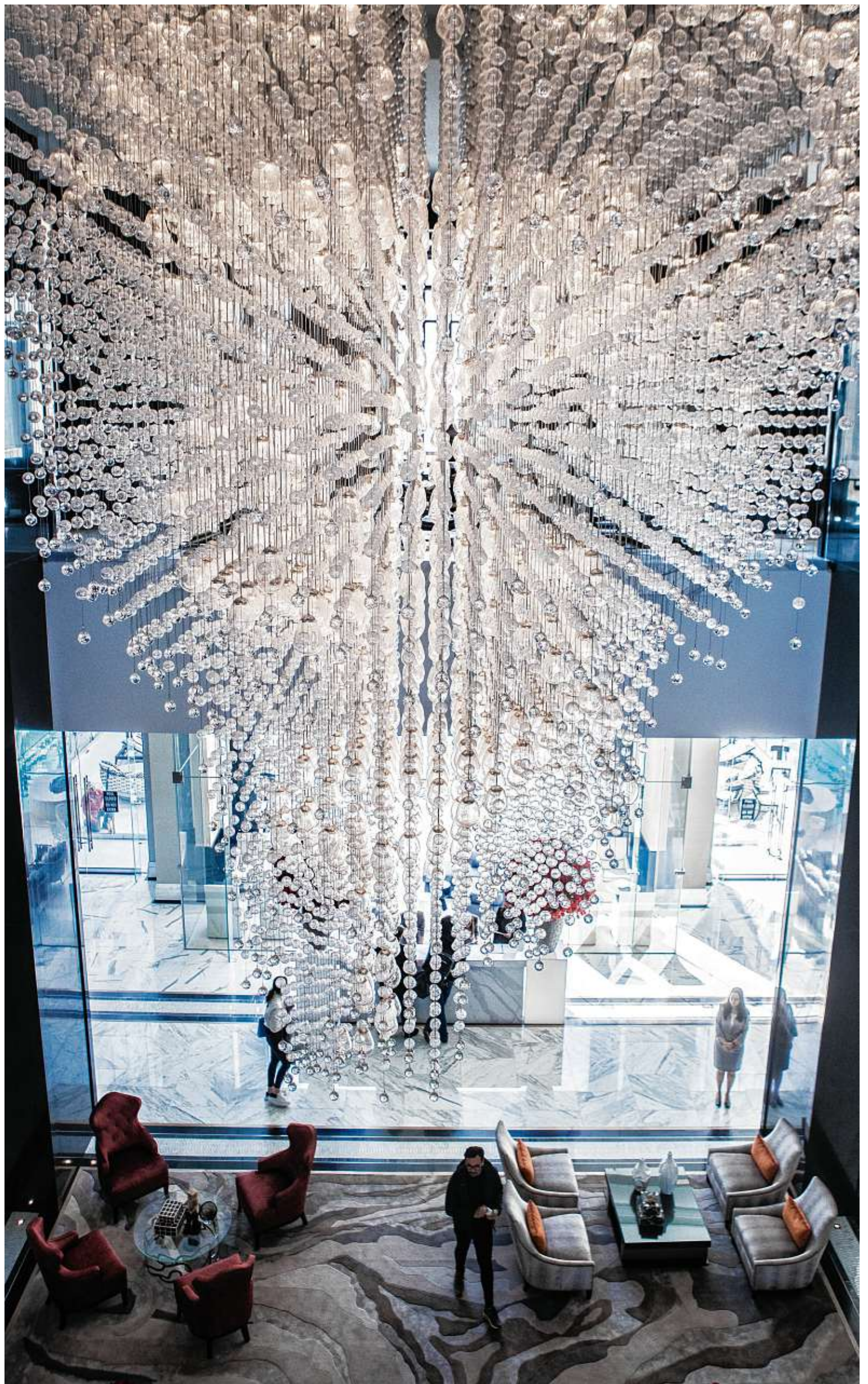
Although a grand-opening date hasn't been set, the hotel is just starting to greet its first guests. This week it will host its first big charity events, with the Houston Chronicle Best Dressed Luncheon and Neiman Marcus Fashion Presentation benefiting the March of Dimes on Tuesday and the Houston Children's Charity Gala on Friday.

The Galveston native and CEO of Landry's Inc. is the big personality behind CNBC's "Billion Dollar Buyer" and, as of last fall, the owner of the Rockets. The Post Oak is the seventh hotel in his portfolio. Along with his five casinos, his properties collectively have 7,000 guest rooms.

The hotel is the crown jewel of the Post Oak at Uptown Houston's 10-acre campus, and with it, Fertitta hopes to bring a new class of hotel to the city.

"I got tired of high-powered CEOs from around the world coming to Houston and saying to me, 'Tilman, why isn't there a first-class hotel in Houston?'" he said from the hotel's lobby. "As much as I did this — that it will grow into a valuable asset in time — I also did it as a civic duty. We needed a first-class hotel in Houston."

That's not to knock other hotels in the city, he said. Fertitta complimented the



A spectacular Swarovski crystal chandelier crowns the lobby of The Post Oak Hotel at Uptown Houston.

Marie D. De Jesús photos / Houston Chronicle



Over a thousand fresh roses fill the urns on the counter of the lobby.



Garden-inspired Bloom & Bee is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

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Marie D. De Jesús photos / Houston Chronicle

The 38-story structure has 250 guest rooms and suites, 20 more executive residences, luxury-car dealerships, a salon, fashion boutique and a collection of restaurants.

Hilton Americas and the new Marriott Marquis Houston as two of the country's best convention hotels.

"This is something I've always wanted to do, and it's a legacy asset," he said. "My family will own this forever. Like the San Luis in Galveston, there are things you own forever."

Some \$350 million has been invested in the 38-story structure that has 250 guest rooms and suites; 20 more executive residences; Rolls-Royce, Bentley and Bugatti car dealerships; a fashion boutique; and a collection of restaurants that includes the new Mastro's Steakhouse and a reimaged Willie G's Seafood.

Plenty of that was spent on rooms; Fertitta said he spent an average of \$1.1 million per guest room and suite. That doesn't count the 10-story parking garage or 10 floors of boutique office space.

Room rates will vary based on time of year, day of week and group rates, but a weeknight rate this week is \$529 a room, which Fertitta said is about \$100 more than any other hotel in town.

Built of concrete and topped with steel — that helps helicopters land on the helipad without too much noise and vibrations — its exterior is



A Frank Stella piece hangs in the lobby behind Landry's Inc. CEO Tilman Fertitta.

clad in limestone, granite and marble with large structural glass openings.

In front of the hotel is a towering vertical garden filled with vibrant dianthus, thick succulents and variegated spider plants.

The hotel's breathtaking lobby is filled with luxurious Italian Calacatta and Calacatta statuary on floors, stairs, some walls and even on intricate,

14-inch marble baseboards throughout the lobby and hallways.

A dazzling, custom-made, million-dollar Swarovski crystal chandelier hangs from its third-floor perch, dangling a shower of globelike crystals through the second-floor mezzanine and into the lobby.

If you overlook the four seating groups of contemporary furniture clustered around a

large round sofa, it's the fault of the towering urns of fresh roses on the reception desk at the back of the room. Each holds 700 roses, and they're likely the first — or maybe second — thing you'll notice when you walk in the door.

Neither the full-floor spa nor the spacious wine cellar is open yet, but Fertitta promises those won't disappoint when they debut later this spring.

Even the smallest guest rooms — they start at 500 square feet — impress. Bathrooms are clad in marble and offer a variety of Acqua di Parma toiletries. Bedding is made of 500-thread-count Egyptian cotton, and pillows in your room will be monogrammed with guests' initials.

Fifty-inch pop-up TVs — two back-to-back screens that retract into a console — are situated between the bed and sofa so you can watch your favorite show from either place. And, yes, you could watch different shows on each screen.

For all the rooms' luxurious appointments, Fertitta loves the fold-up ironing board that tucks into a small drawer. Need a last-minute press on your shirt collar before a big meeting? Do it with not much fuss.

Even your pet gets spoiled here: Plush dog beds and food/water bowls are provided, and

the pet dining menu includes filet mignon.

All of this feeds into the goal of that five-star rating, general manager Jorge Gonzales says. Getting the rating is tough, he said.

A hotel starts by approaching Forbes about the rating and working with its recommendations on hotel amenities and staff training. One inspector visits the hotel for one night, unannounced. If the hotel fails, it's a full year before there is another shot.

"It's about the guest experience," Gonzales said. "It's not about the bedding or the room's square footage, it's about how you feel at the end of your stay."

Even details such as how warm and welcoming the staff is — "I cannot teach you how to smile," Gonzales notes — and the manner in which they speak to guests matter.

"There's no, 'Hi, guys,'" he said. "It's, 'Good afternoon, sir.'"

If and when the Post Oak gets that sought-after rating, the work won't stop.

"Once you get the five stars, that's when you lose sleep," Gonzales said. "Then you have to keep it."

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Bathrooms, clad in marble, are stocked with Acqua di Parma toiletries.



Post Oak Hotel guest rooms offer expansive views of Houston.



Light fixture in the Grand Ballroom



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