



International and local sensibilities converge at the Virgin Hotels Nashville, an alluring and comfortable retreat by Markzeff

tennessee shuffle

text: ted loos photography: eric laignel





Previous spread: At the Virgin Hotels Nashville in Tennessee by Markzeff, the Commons Club's reclaimed oak paneling hosts a wall collage of dozens of vintage cameras—one in Virgin red, the same color as the felt on the billiards table—by Live Artfully Atelier.

Opposite top: The floating steel staircase in the Commons echoes the industrial aesthetic of the ground-up, 14-story building by Blur Workshop and Hastings Architecture. **Opposite bottom:** In reception, an installation of musical instruments is by John Peralta.

Top, from left: A custom rug in the Commons was inspired by an antique Turkish design. More reclaimed oak anchors reception. **Bottom:** Surrounded by reclaimed rough-sawn Douglas fir planks, lime-wash paint and polyester velvet appaint the library's 13-foot-high niche. Photography: courtesy of Virgin Hotels.



For designers, working with a strong brand is a blessing. But it can be a tricky one. It's helpful to have elements to build upon for the narrative. But how to make a project reflect the company identity as well as one's own expertise? *Interior Design* Hall of Fame member Mark Zeff faced this duality when conceiving the Virgin Hotels Nashville in Tennessee, the burgeoning brand's third completed property.

Virgin Group, founded by British multi-hyphenate Sir Richard Branson, has long spread its particular type of insouciance across its airplanes, record label, and even vodka. That cheek permeates the company's hotels, too. At the Chicago property, for instance, there's a white porcelain dog keeping watch outside each pet-friendly guest room. The details are sometimes rooted in locale. Bartender uniforms for Virgin Hotels Las Vegas, opening soon, are patterned with card suits. All the properties, however, share a common thread: frequent appearances of what's called Virgin red.

The 262-key Nashville project continues that tradition. Zeff, a South Africa native with myriad hotel, restaurant, bar, and spa interiors in his portfolio, as well as residences for the likes of Gabriel Byrne and Hilary Swank, and the Markzeff director of hospitality design, Stacie Meador, pull off the task of incorporating just enough of Virgin's DNA to reflect its signature playfulness while still instilling the firm's own undeniable stamp and Nashville's essence. "The idea was to embrace the music idea, but not go too heavy into it," Zeff begins, "and to incorporate a bit of Virgin's whimsy."

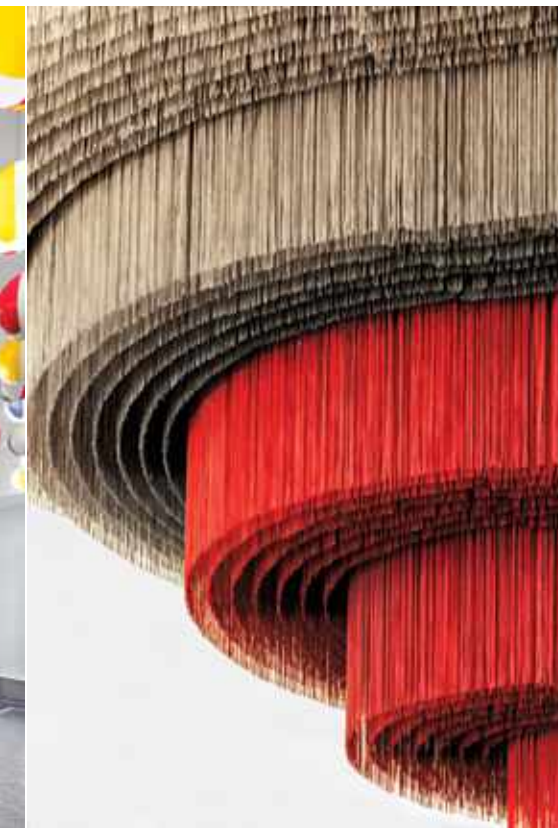
The property opened on the city's famed Music Row in quintessential 2020 fashion—during the heart of the pandemic but before the tragic December bombing—in a new 14-story, 200,000-square-foot building with a rooftop swimming pool by Blur Workshop and Hastings Architecture. Zeff and Meador's modern-industrial interiors echo the structure's steel-and-glass shell, and then they warmed things up with bursts of that special red, painted brick, and reclaimed-wood millwork. As for requests from the client, specifically Virgin Hotels vice president of design Teddy Mayer and former CEO Raul Leal, the brief was for the site to be truly welcoming. "Every guest should be able to find a niche for themselves," Leal said before recently stepping down.

The music theme is struck soundly at the beginning of the journey, with a massive installation of country instruments hanging above the pair of reception desks, backed by a wall of reclaimed oak. The heart of the project is a two-story lounge called the Commons Club, a feature in all Virgin Hotels, that's anchored by a billiards table and a floating steel staircase, both with soft surfaces in red. ➤





Opposite top: Custom teak chaise longues line the rooftop pool.
Opposite bottom: Cowhide-strip wall covering and velvet upholstery join a shag rug in the Shag Room, the hotel's private lounge.



Top, from left: The elevator lobby leading to the rooftop pool features custom beach ball-inspired pendant fixtures. Based on Western fringe shirts, the lounge's custom chandelier is five tiers and 11 feet at its widest. **Bottom:** All Virgin Hotels guest rooms are outfitted with Virgin's proprietary bed design, but this property's are trimmed in leather. Photography: courtesy of Virgin Hotels.



"Guests often have their picture taken next to it," Mayer notes. The Commons serves as "the courtyard, the piazza of the village, the collecting point for everybody," Zeff says of the lounge, from which visitors can access the Kitchen, the Bar, and the Shag Room, as Virgin dubs its food and beverage spaces.

Referencing Nashville's abundant scenery, a collage of dozens of vintage cameras—surrounding a single red one—hangs on one wall of the Commons. Under a grand chandelier of exposed light bulbs, a rug inspired by antique Turkish carpet, a luxe sofa upholstered in cowboy-boot brown leather, and deep-blue velvet armchairs—all custom, like much of the furnishings throughout the hotel—form an eclectic seating area. A last-minute reconfiguration of the furniture right before the July opening, so guests could maintain social-distancing, ended up reinforcing the openness and flexibility of the space.

"We try to be flirty," Mayer says about the Shag Room, the hotel's super-sexy private bar/lounge. But it could easily be called the Fringe Room, too. In doing her Nashville research, "I happened upon all these cool Western shirts with gorgeous fringe," Meador says. She ran with the idea and created an enormous five-tiered ceiling fixture draped in shimmering gray and red fringe. She then echoed its verticality in the wall covering, made from long strips of gray cowhide. Plush velvet banquettes and carpet, shag of course, all in charcoal, complete the sultry scene.

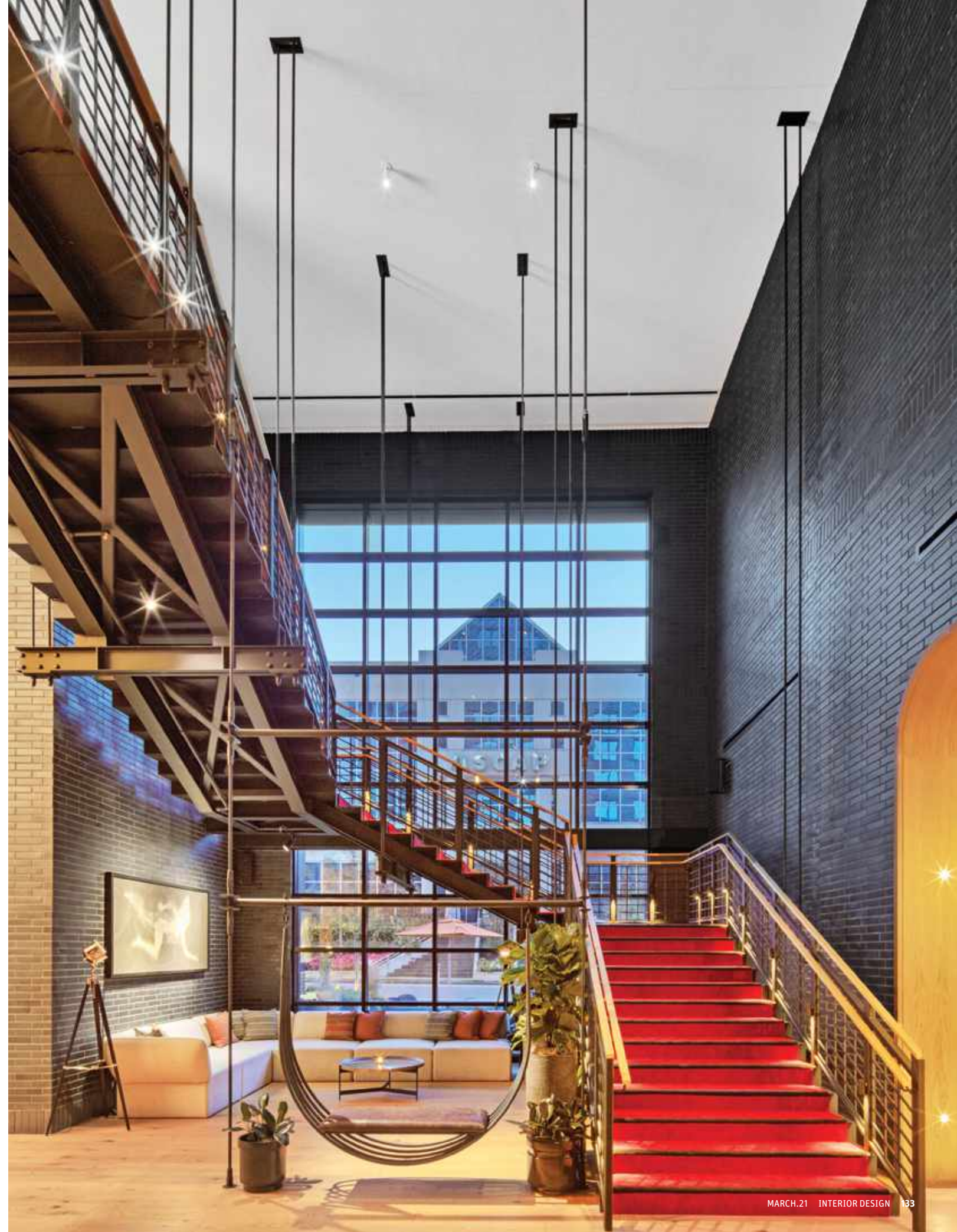
In the guest rooms, Virgin stipulates the same bed for all its hotels, cosseted in curves resembling the ones in first class on the company's airplanes. To give them a Nashville nod, the Markzeff team edged them in deep-brown leather. Pillow-filled window seats make every chamber feel like an oasis, as do the bathrooms. Carrara marble vanity tops, a separate well-lit makeup area, and an extra curtain for privacy make them, Meador notes, "female-centric," given the brand's appeal to women. ➤



Top, from left: A guest room's custom steel sconce. Felt banquette fabric at the Kitchen restaurant. Custom plate pendant fixtures in private dining; photography: courtesy of Virgin Hotels. **Bottom, from left:** Neon signage atop the steel entry canopy. The pre-function area's Abigail Avery Books art piece. The rooftop bar's mural by Emily Elizabeth Miller.



Opposite: The building's exterior and interior palette of brick, steel, and wood comes together in the Commons, where a custom swing seat and sectional stand on planks of engineered European white oak. ➔





Opposite top: Every Virgin Hotels property has a presidential suite called Richard's Flat, after the company's owner, Sir Richard Branson; this one includes lime-washed walls and a custom wool rug. **Opposite bottom:** Lamb topiaries and faux-grass furniture, all custom, populate the events-space terrace; photography: courtesy of Virgin Hotels.
Top, from left: Guest bathrooms combine Carrara marble and oak. Along guest hallways of custom Axminster carpet, doors are lacquered Virgin red. **Bottom:** Pendant lanterns by Casamidy cluster above a custom sectional in the presidential suite's living room.



Every Virgin property also has a presidential suite called Richard's Flat, after Sir Branson; Nashville's is 1,500 square feet and Zeff mixed in lanterns from Mexico and sconces by Rich Brilliant Willing.

As for red in the guest quarters, doors are coated in it as are bathroom showerheads, developed specially with Kohler. "It's that balance between good design and not taking yourself too seriously," Meador says. To wit, the Funny Library, another Virgin Hotels public-space staple, displays humorous books and bobbleheads on its built-in shelves, but has an overall sophisticated global/local air, thanks to a 13-foot-high seating niche cloaked in jewel-toned teal and flanked by planks of rough-sawn Douglas fir. 🍷

PROJECT TEAM

ERIKA BRITTON: MARKZEFF. **BLUR WORKSHOP;** HASTINGS ARCHITECTURE: DESIGN ARCHITECTS. **BOLD:** LIGHTING CONSULTANT. **MUSEUM EDITIONS:** ART CONSULTANT. **CRE CRISTINA RIVER EXCHANGE:** PURCHASING AGENT. **EMC STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS:** STRUCTURAL ENGINEER. **BLUM CONSULTING ENGINEERS:** MEP. **BARGE CAUTHEN & ASSOCIATES:** CIVIL ENGINEER. **YATES CONSTRUCTION:** GENERAL CONTRACTOR.

PRODUCT SOURCES

FROM FRONT RESTORATION HARDWARE: BILLIARDS TABLE, BARSTOOLS (COMMONS). **ORIENTAL WEAVERS:** CUSTOM STAIR RUNNER. **LUSIVE DECOR:** CUSTOM CHANDELIER. **CREATIVE TOUCH:** CUSTOM RUG. **RUSTBELT RECLAMATION:** CUSTOM SWING SEAT (COMMONS), TABLES (RESTAURANT). **CASTE:** WOOD TABLE (COMMONS). **THROUGH DANISH DESIGN STORE:** LOUNGE CHAIR (LIBRARY), SIDE TABLE (SUITE BEDROOM). **VISUAL COMFORT & CO.:** SCONCES (LIBRARY). **COURISTAN:** CUSTOM RUNNER. **DESIGN WITHIN REACH:** SIDE TABLES (LIBRARY), TABLES (LOUNGE). **TUUCI:** UMBRELLAS (POOL). **MODERN SHOP:** OTTOMANS (LOUNGE). **RANGE PROJECTS:** CUSTOM CHANDELIER. **M&J TRIMMING:** FRINGE. **PERFECT RUG:** RUG. **KYLE BUNTING:** WALL COVERING. **STELLAR WORKS:** CHAIR (ROOFTOP LOBBY), CHAIRS (RESTAURANT). **SUNSET DESIGNS:** CUSTOM PENDANT FIXTURES, CUSTOM SCONCES (ROOFTOP LOBBY), CUSTOM LAMPS (RESTAURANT). **CHAPMAN:** CUSTOM SCONCES (GUEST ROOMS). **CHANDRA:** CUSTOM AREA RUG. **BLACK ROOSTER DECOR:** COCKTAIL TABLE (COMMONS). **LIGHTOLOGY:** FLOOR LAMP. **REJUVENATION:** PLANTERS. **YUNXIU LIGHTING:** CUSTOM CHANDELIER (PRIVATE DINING). **TEAK WAREHOUSE:** CHAIRS (BAR). **NORTH 88 OUTDOOR:** TABLE. **STRADITION:** PENDANT FIXTURE. **TACCHINI:** CHAIR (SUITE BEDROOM). **HUDSON VALLEY LIGHTING:** FLOOR LAMP. **MARC PHILLIPS:** CUSTOM RUGS (SUITE). **PAMPA:** THROW PILLOWS (SUITE). **MAJESTIC MIRROR & FRAME:** CUSTOM BACKLIT MIRROR (BATHROOM). **FOUNDATION HOSPITALITY:** CUSTOM MIRROR. **TUDO & CO.:** SCONCES. **KOHLER CO.:** SINK FITTINGS. **ROYAL THAI:** CUSTOM CARPET (HALL). **ARTICLE:** OTTOMAN (SUITE LIVING AREA). **INDUSTRY WEST:** CREDENZA. **CASAMIDY:** PENDANT LANTERNS. **RICH BRILLIANT WILLING THROUGH THE FUTURE PERFECT:** SCONCES. **THROUGHOUT ARCHITEX;** CARNEGIE; DESIGNTEX; ELITIS; FIL DOUX; KRAVET; MAHARAM; OPUZEN; PERENNIALS FABRICS; ERICA SHAMROCK TEXTILES: UPHOLSTERY. **GLOBAL LEATHERS;** MOORE & GILES; TIGER LEATHER: LEATHER. **DS MICHAEL FURNITURE;** FAIRMONT DESIGNS; LILY JACK; LUXE FFE; QUALITY & CO.; SKYPAD INTERNATIONAL; **TELOS HOSPITALITY:** CUSTOM FURNITURE. **HF DESIGN:** ENGINEERED FLOORING. **ENDICOTT:** BRICK. **BENJAMIN MOORE & CO.;** PORTOLA PAINTS & GLAZES: PAINT.

