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Photos by MONA REEDER/Staff Photographer

Developer Charlie Givens has dedicated the last year and a half of his life to Hotel ZaZa, Dallas' first boutique hotel.

Delighting in the details

Hotel ZaZa developer wants everything to be 'just right'

By SUZANNE MARTA
Staff Writer

In the days leading up to this week's opening, Hotel ZaZa developer Charlie Givens could usually be found walking briskly through the corridors with a cellphone to his ear and a pocketful of notes.

Every time Mr. Givens would stop, a handful of people would line up — the landscape supervisor with a handful of tree photos, a subcontractor discussing how to match edging pieces for the marble countertops, workers with questions about installing the lobby speakers.

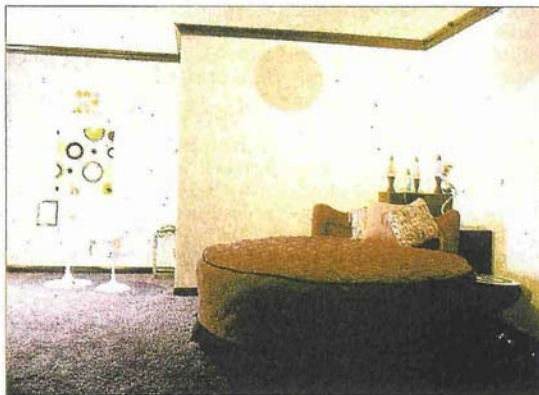
During one pass through the

lobby, Mr. Givens spied a new furniture grouping, paused and then shifted the chairs closer to the couch.

"I basically stick my big nose into everyone's business," he said.

It's that level of involvement that makes Mr. Givens stand out from his peers, said Clayton Bennett, a longtime Givens friend and owner of Dorchester Capital, an Oklahoma City-based investment group.

"Charlie's intimately involved with every aspect of development, from the concept and site development to the time tenants move in," Mr. Bennett said.



The hotel's rooms contain contemporary art and unusual furniture. Suites have themes such as "shag-a-delic" (above).

Hotel ZaZa is a different kind of project for Mr. Givens, who most recently has focused on up-scale retirement complexes. Ho-

tel ZaZa, which he is developing with partner Jeff Records, is just

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his second hotel and the first he's built since the 1980s.

"My real dream was to be a Broadway producer, but that didn't work out," Mr. Givens said. "This is as close as I could get."

Mr. Givens, whose 23-year-old development company also is based in Oklahoma City, has dedicated the last year and a half of his life to Hotel ZaZa, Dallas' first boutique hotel, working six or seven days a week, 12 to 14 hours a day. Few details escape his attention.

In the hotel restaurant, Dragonfly — where Star Canyon founder Stephan Pyles holds the culinary reins — Mr. Givens agonized last week over how the curtains and lights are arranged.

"If I'm sitting over here, is that going to be troubling?" he asked while lowering himself down along the wall as if sitting in a chair.

Apparently yes. Using a yard-long piece of scrap wood, he reached up and tilted the light toward the wall.

"I really want to see how the place runs and make sure everything is just right," said Mr. Givens, 53.

His concern is justified. Hotel ZaZa, a \$30 million project on Leonard Street near McKinney Avenue, is opening during the worst slump in the Dallas hospitality industry since at least the late 1980s.

Dallas is suffering more than

CHARLIE GIVENS

Age: 53

Company: Charles S. Givens Interests LLC in Oklahoma City, founded in 1979.

Employees: 30

Family: Wife, Laurie; four daughters; and one son.

Current project: Hotel ZaZa, 2332 Leonard St. in the Uptown area of Dallas

Recent projects: Luxury retirement communities in Oklahoma City, including The Mansion at Waterford, Statesman Club and Manchester House

SOURCE: Dallas Morning News research

many tourist-dependent destinations because so many business travelers — who make up 85 percent of the city's hotel guests — have stayed home since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Occupancy levels have been about 10 percent below those enjoyed in the boom years of the late 1990s and 2000.

Hotel ZaZa also doesn't benefit from being part of a nationally recognized chain. And Mr. Givens isn't spending on advertising, relying on word-of-mouth to create awareness of what he calls the hotel's "daring and sensual" style.

It's a style played out throughout the hotel. A lobby chandelier changes colors to set the mood. Employees dress in basic black rather than uniforms. The 146

rooms are filled with contemporary art and unusual furniture, such as the lush velvet chairs embroidered with the word "yes."

Some rooms have milky, poetry-etched glass separating the bedroom from the shower, offering tiny hints of the person inside. "It depends on how long the poem is," Mr. Givens joked.

There are 13 suites, each with its own theme, such as "shag-a-delic" or "erotica."

Early booking to Hotel ZaZa has been stronger than expected, and the first guests checked in Monday. Occupancy is expected to be around 75 percent by February, Mr. Givens said.

If the Hotel ZaZa concept succeeds, he plans to build several others. He's already looking at sites in Houston, Austin and Denver.

Mr. Givens isn't planning to vanish from town now that the hotel is finished. He's reserved a room for himself for a year. And in early 2003, he plans to start a condo project next to the hotel, where owners can "access room service and live the ZaZa lifestyle," Mr. Givens said.

Development

Mr. Givens got a taste for the development business through his father, Roger Givens, who specialized in neighborhoods for lower-income families in the Oklahoma City area. "Even as a little boy, I was rearranging furniture and drawing developments," he said.

But Charlie Givens didn't want to follow exactly in his father's footsteps. "I love beautiful things," he said. "It's tough to be terribly creative with a low-income development."

He dropped out of the University of Oklahoma at age 20 and started buying older homes, fixing them up and reselling them for a profit. At 21, he developed an 80-unit apartment complex in Oklahoma City. He built his portfolio slowly, scouring the city for parcels of land to develop, starting with condominiums.

In the late 1970s, Mr. Givens started a mixed-use project called The Waterford. The \$100 million project included a 200-room four-star hotel that Mr. Givens patterned after The Mansion on Turtle Creek, 450,000 square-feet of office space and 121 condos.

The project offered tough lessons. The banking and real estate markets were in turmoil and demand for hotels disintegrated. The development sold, but the "hotel

just about chopped my head off," Mr. Givens said.

In the late 1980s, Mr. Givens left Oklahoma for Tennessee, where he did a few small projects in Nashville, then briefly relocated to Los Angeles to sell garage storage systems he developed.

Even while he was away, Mr. Givens kept small projects going in Oklahoma City. He bought distressed property and unfinished projects from the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. and reworked them into profitable developments. In 1992, he returned to Oklahoma to develop projects full-time.

Over the last decade, he's specialized in high-end condominiums, lakeside resorts and upscale retirement communities.

Value and vision

"Charlie understands how to get the most value out of his budget," Mr. Bennett said. "He's very committed to doing new and creative things that mean something to people and make the communities

they're in better places to live."

Value is a key philosophy at Hotel ZaZa. Standard room prices top out at \$195, though suites are priced as high as \$1,000 a night.

"I want people to check out of here and say, I would have gladly paid more," Mr. Givens said. "Don't you love it when you feel that way?"

Hotel ZaZa also is Mr. Givens' chance to create a hotel that fits his taste for flair and style. "I work hard, and I play hard," he said. "We want people to come back again and again and not be bored."

Longtime business partners credit Mr. Givens' vision for his success.

"He's got a real knack for seeing a piece of land and visualizing how it can look really good," said Jim Cleaver, senior vice president of Midland Financial Co., which has financed several of Mr. Givens' projects. "He's got a flair for marketing and he knows how to make projects appeal to people."

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