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Westin, Meliá getting new rooms for 2012

Premium content from Atlanta Business Chronicle by Lisa R. Schoolcraft, Staff Writer

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Two of downtown Atlanta's major hotels are about to undergo top to bottom renovations.

The Westin Peachtree Plaza, Atlanta, plans to start a \$47 million rooms renovation in November, and Meliá Atlanta will begin its \$25 million renovation of public space and rooms in late January.

And more hotels are in the process of planning room renovations, including the Hilton Atlanta Airport, Westin Buckhead Atlanta and InterContinental Buckhead Atlanta.

The Hyatt Regency Atlanta and JW Marriott Atlanta Buckhead are both finishing up renovations.

For the Westin Peachtree Plaza and Meliá Atlanta, room renovations are long overdue.

"Both are very much needed," said **Paul Breslin**, managing partner at **Panther Hospitality**, a hotel consulting firm in Atlanta.

The last time the Westin downtown renovated its rooms was 1999, said **Ed Walls**, outgoing general manager of the convention hotel. (See related story, Page 20A.)

"It's a big renovation," he said. "We will totally redo the rooms."

For the Westin, that's 1,068 rooms, Walls said, and the renovation will add five one-bedroom suites to the hotel's inventory by redoing a lounge.

The hotel will also put architect **John Portman's** personal suite back in its inventory, he said. Portman built the 73-story Westin in 1976.

The room renovation at the Westin was planned years ago, but the 2008 downtown tornado that damaged many of the hotel's windows pushed back the project, Walls said, as did the Great Recession.

The Westin also just replaced its 30-year-old central plant, including new energy-efficient chillers, boilers, heating, air conditioning and hot water pumps, another project that had to be complete before work began on the rooms, he said.

The rooms renovation should begin Nov. 14 and take 10 months to 12 months to complete, he added.

Meliá Atlanta, which entered the market about a year ago, began construction on a mock guest room Oct. 3, and that mock guest room will allow the company to assess guest preferences before the full construction begins early next year, said **Alicia Junca**, director of sales and marketing.

Spanish hotel giant Sol Meliá Hotels & Resorts entered the U.S. market last year with the opening of Meliá Atlanta at 590 West Peachtree St. N.W. in the former 502-room Renaissance Atlanta Hotel Downtown.

The renovations to the property should be complete in early 2013, Junca said. The designs "are so European, so there is nothing to compare it to in America, but anyone who has traveled in Europe would recognize it. It is very clean, very fresh."

Renovations big and small

The upcoming renovations mean both hotels will better compete with their neighbor hotels, and with properties in other cities, Breslin said.

"When you look at the competitive landscape, it goes beyond their competitors down the street," he said.

Guests begin comparisons with the same brand in Chicago, Las Vegas and Orlando, Breslin said. "If you don't keep up — even if you just maintain — you are behind."

Westin is "at the epicenter of Atlanta, and the expectation is not only for it to be a four-diamond, but four-star," he said.

The stakes are even higher for a new brand like Meliá, said **Linda Wilson**, president of **Key Advisors Inc.**, a hospitality consulting firm in Atlanta. "They have their brand identity that they want to make a splash with."

Meliá is a known brand in Europe, Breslin said, and the expectations are much higher for the international traveler.

"The big brands are spending the money this year," said **Ken Smith**, project executive for Winter Construction Co. in Atlanta, which worked on the Hyatt Regency Atlanta and JW Marriott Atlanta Buckhead. "But there will be a next wave that will happen next year. There's a lot happening."

Smith said his company is working on or bidding on hotel renovation work all across the Southeast and the volume is much greater now than just a year ago.

"There are a lot of renovations that are in the planning stages that are starting or starting soon," he said.

Lisa R. Schoolcraft covers Restaurants and Retail