

**LUCKY CHARMER:** Two years before opening day, Robin Brown has sold all but one of the Mandarin Oriental's 50 condominiums.



AS THE CHARISMATIC GENERAL MANAGER OF THE FOUR SEASONS, ROBIN BROWN RAISED THE BAR ON GLAMOUR IN BOSTON. WITH HIS NEW PROJECT, THE MANDARIN ORIENTAL, HE'S CASHING IN ON HIS REPUTATION—AND PUSHING BOSTON TO THE NEXT LEVEL OF LUXURY. BY ALEXANDRA HALL

# SUITE DREAMS



**IT WASN'T A CONSCIOUS AUDITION**, the night that Robin Brown landed his first Hollywood role five years ago. In fact, there was little to separate it from so many other nights in Brown's very public, very social life. ¶ Then general manager of the Four Seasons Hotel Boston and resident auctioneer at Cambridge's American Repertory Theatre, Brown was working the crowd at an A.R.T. benefit with the help of guest auctioneers Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. He looked out at the audience, filled with local bigwigs like Bob Kraft and Richie Balsbaugh, and got an idea. ¶ "I knew Ben and Matt were very committed to the A.R.T.," Brown remembers, his words wrapped in a crisp British

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cadence. “So I just decided to auction *them* off—without their permission. You know, a lunch with them. And things just escalated from there. Soon there was a lot of money flying around and I was auctioning off drinks with Gwyneth Paltrow—who was also there—“at the pool of the Four Seasons Beverly Hills.” Brown tacked thousands onto the A.R.T.’s spoils that night, but he also snagged the admiration of director Sam Weisman—an onlooker who was, at the time, in the market for someone to play an auctioneer in his film *What’s the Worst That Could*

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*Happen?* The next day, Weisman called and offered him the part. “I thought about it for all of three seconds before saying yes,” Brown says, and laughs.

Brown isn’t packing his bags for Hollywood, but he is more than a little accustomed to selling things by sheer force of personality—and not just in auctioneering, at which he’s known around town as a seasoned expert. In 13 years as general manager, he helped establish the Four Seasons as Boston’s first five-star hotel, one of its epicenters of glamour. And he did it not just by selling hotel rooms, but by selling Robin Brown. Now he’s doing it again, this time from the ground up.

**CHARMINGLY PROPER** but slyly inappropriate, unerringly confident but consistently self-deprecating, Brown is John Cleese just before he takes his first step in the Ministry of Silly Walks. He is the self-confessed wannabe standup comic who always seems to realize when to hold back and when to let fly. Those who know him well describe him as a master of never quite crossing the line, of reading those around him with amazing accuracy and knowing exactly how far to push their sensibilities. “Robin is one of the most honest, funny people I know,” says Nader Daresshori, former CEO and chairman of Houghton Mifflin and current CEO of Cambium Learning, who has been Brown’s guest at the Four Seasons and friend since 1998. “His humor is always at his own

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expense, never anyone else's. He can smooth any problem over—either with his wit or by making it disappear.”

It's a skill Brown employs not only in his relationships, but in his professional projects, the most immediate of which—the \$230 million Mandarin Oriental Boston hotel—is finally under construction at the Prudential Center. Planned as a combination of condominiums, hotel rooms, and rental apartments, the 14-story hotel is being counted on to revitalize the area along upper Boylston Street and connect the Pru with Copley Square. Its long-term ambitions soar even higher: to raise the bar on luxury in our glitz-wary burg and put it on the map—along with Hong Kong, Bangkok, San Francisco, and Miami—of the select few cities that have Mandarin Oriental hotels. (“It will make the Four Seasons look like the Two Seasons,” quips someone connected with the project.) With Boston's reputation for avoiding flashiness in any form, that may take every last ounce of Brown's talents.

So far, so good. With the building not even scheduled to open for two more years, all but one of the Mandarin Oriental's 50 condominiums—which cost from \$2 million to \$12 million apiece—have been sold. A healthy number of the buyers are high-powered acquaintances of Brown or his two partners, Julian Cohen and Stephen Weiner, real estate magnates who together have developed premier properties including The Mall at Chestnut Hill.

“Steve and I have handled every single condominium presale personally,” Brown says. “You won't see any marketing or ads for these. It's all been word of mouth.” And how the word has spread. Philanthropist David Mugar has snapped up one of the pricey condos. So have former FleetBoston CEO Chad Gifford, Celtics co-owner Robert Epstein, automotive mogul Herb Chambers, and Democratic fundraisers Gerry and Elaine Schuster.

What will they get for their millions? “We've spent the last few years working out all the painstaking details of the infrastructure,” Brown says, “engineering a building layout that will mean, for example, that no guest ever has to wait more than 10 minutes for coffee or five minutes for their car. And when they get it, their luggage will already be packed in its trunk, because we're placing the service elevator in the right place to get it there.” This also means that when guests

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or residents—who'll have access to all the hotel's amenities—order an omelet it will arrive hot. These are the kind of details that, if Brown and company can pull them off, will set the Mandarin Oriental apart from other hotels in town, which have flawless service or higher-than-high-end materials and amenities, but not both. The prices will set this hotel apart, too: Although the Boston room rates haven't yet been determined, a night at the Mandarin Oriental in New York starts at more than \$700.

**LIFE ON A GRAND SCALE** has always appealed to Brown, now 50. He grew up in the small town of Grantham in the English Midlands and, at 16, got a job as a pot washer at the White Hart hotel in Lincolnshire. The motivation? To earn enough money to buy a motorbike and go off to see the world. "Cooking

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and the hospitality industry seemed to be a way to escape the small-town life," Brown remembers. He worked for Westin Hotels & Resorts, then the Four Seasons, and in 1988 arrived in Boston.

It wasn't long before Brown started piecing together his vision for an altogether new kind of hotel. "One day Steve and Julian and I had coffee, and within a week we started talking about a new level of hotel in Boston, something with a retail component and 50 or so condos that would be more like individual homes," he explains. "We decided that if we could do that, it would be a phenomenal business plan." His partners give Brown more of the credit. "Robin has always been considered the premier hotel general manager," Weiner says. "His dream was one we liked and admired, so we agreed to support and sponsor the dream." And just like that, Brown went from hotel employee to project co-owner. He was made a partner without having to put up any of his own money; the force of his personality was so great that his partners accepted it as his investment.

If Weiner and Cohen had any doubts, they disappeared at Brown's Four Seasons goodbye party, which drew the city's

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A list and raised more than \$550,000 for an Alzheimer's charity set up in honor of Brown's father. Mayor Tom Menino, Patriots owner Bob Kraft, Weisman, former Bruin Cam Neely—all were among the 500 well-wishers who gathered to give Brown his sendoff.

Of course, things got a little tougher after that. Building a new hotel in this city turned out to be, as Brown discovered, a “long, difficult, and tedious process.” For starters, it took more than two years before he and his partners found just the right site. Then there were the 22 neighborhood groups to contend with, each concerned about any changes made to the Prudential Center. “It’s such an important building to the city,” Brown says of the hotel. “The community knows it’s the connection between so many areas—Copley to the Prudential and the Back Bay to the South End.” What’s more, it will connect a handful of other structures and interests—the Lord & Taylor building, the Prudential parking garage, Legal Sea Foods, the Avalon apartments, and a park Brown’s group is building.

Physical and political complications like these have meant a slow-going process. But Brown’s connections paved the way. “Robin has improved the city in a thousand small, behind-the-scenes ways,” says Paul Levy, CEO of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, on whose advisory board Brown serves. “It’s only natural that the people who see him do that will admire him and want to work with him in other ways.” Brown is quick to make a distinction between his business aims and his community work, however. “Knowing the people we do certainly hasn’t done any harm,” he admits. “But for the three of us, our commitment in town helped people to take the leap. Because it *does* take a leap of faith to buy a condominium that doesn’t exist yet.”

**THE BIGGEST QUESTION** is whether Boston will be able to accept the kind of luxury that comes with a hotel like this. After all, the city historically has had a tentative—if not downright tortured—relationship with opulence. Long after people in other major cities were blowing hundreds at plush day spas, Bostonians were still refusing to spend more than \$15 on a manicure. We still prefer our buildings—even the new ones—to evoke history rather than status. “Twenty years ago, Boston did not fully appreciate luxury,” Brown agrees.

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“Perhaps it was a Puritan thing.”

That ethos is changing, however. “We have James Levine leading the BSO,” he says. “We had Ralph Lauren showing his cars at the MFA. Think about the renovation of the Wang and the Shubert, and Mayor Menino’s vision in renovating the Opera House on Washington Street.”

Many—including Menino himself—expect the Mandarin Oriental’s 492 linear feet on Boylston to lift up that neighborhood, long a poor stepsister to swanky Newbury Street. Even the competition is on board. As Ron Druker,

**Boston historically has had a tortured relationship with opulence. Will this city be able to accept such a high level of luxury?**

president of the Druker Company, which owns the nearby Colonnade Hotel and Residences, puts it, “Robin is an expert at hotel management, and brings great relationships with him wherever he goes. So we see this as a very good thing for the area.”

The Mandarin Oriental’s façade—a mix of limestone, brick, granite, and glass—will meld contemporary with classic design. There will be separate entrances for high-end retail shops and a stand-alone restaurant. (There are rumors of talks with L’Espalier chef-owner Frank McClelland, but none of the parties would confirm this.) The guest rooms will feature 9-foot ceilings, walk-in closets, and marble bathrooms with vaulted ceilings. The 14,000-square-foot spa will offer everything from couples’ massage and hydrotherapy to tea lounges and steam rooms. Some of the 2,000-to-4,000-square-foot condos will sport private elevators, balconies, and roof terraces. “It’s going to be an iconic building in the city,” says Brown. And then comes his signature knack for knowing just when to pull back. “But everything—everything in the hotel’s design—will have a tastefulness that’s appropriate to Boston.”

Cheerleader, born networker, salesman, auctioneer—Brown is determined to sell Boston, and to sell it on its own promise. “This is already an international city,” he says. “And by the time we open, it will be hitting its stride.” **B**