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REAL ESTATE

Couple behind hotel/museum are rule-breakers

Taste in art will bring a contemporary, quirky feel to development.

By **Shonda Novak**
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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Steve Wilson admits he's "not very good about rules."

"I was born in a fairly restrictive community in the Bible Belt," said Wilson, half of the husband-and-wife team that created the provocative 21c Museum Hotel concept in Louisville, Ky., which they plan to bring to downtown Austin. "I'm all about opening up the barriers and encouraging people to be creative and expressive."

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Steve Wilson

Wilson has traveled far and wide, geographically and philosophically, from his roots in the small farming community of Wickliffe, on Kentucky's western tip. He and his wife, Laura Lee Brown, also a Kentucky native, trot the globe collecting art, some of which they display in their 21c hotel.

Throughout the Louisville hotel, free expression reigns in its rotating exhibitions and dedicated gallery spaces.

The Louisville hotel features a group of oversized red penguins, sculpted from petroleum products by Cracking Art, an Italian nonprofit artists' group that creates plastic representations of endangered wildlife and has exhibited widely throughout Europe.

Wilson said he plans to commission the group to do a version for the Austin hotel with green penguins, highlighting Austin's environmental sensibilities.

Wilson and Brown collect art only by living artists. They are particularly interested in art that challenges and surprises and collect in all media, including video and installation. Although they have many big names in their collection, they eschew buying solely on reputation and instead "go for the gut reaction," Wilson said.

Within the past year they bought a sculpture — an installation of cast concrete forms of plastic water bottles — by Tiffany Carbonneau, a Georgetown artist recently featured in the Texas Biennial 2007.

Wilson and Brown also are bison farmers. They live in a 19th-century farmhouse on 1,000 acres where they put in a conservation easement and raise bison.

Bison is served in the 21c hotel restaurant, Proof on Main, and Austinites can expect a couple of bison dishes on the menu of the restaurant planned for the local 21c hotel.

"We call it from gate to plate," Wilson said. "I thought I'd never live on a farm again, and now I'm farming."

Additional material from staff writer Jeanne Claire van Ryzin.

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Laura Lee Brown

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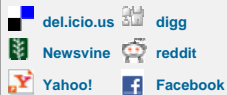
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