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Populous and Churchill Downs Reveal First Turn Experience for 149th Kentucky Derby

50,000-Square-Foot Hospitality Experience Creates Exclusive Premium Indoor Space for around 2,000 guests, an Adjacent Trackside Viewing Terrace and 5,100 Added Stadium Seats

May 4, 2023 - LOUISVILLE, Ky. – Populous and Churchill Downs unveiled the new First Turn experience as part of a multi-phase transformation underway at the legendary Louisville, KY racetrack. Home to the renowned Kentucky Derby, which attracts approximately 150,000 guests annually, Churchill Downs and design architect Populous are bringing next-level updates to guests as part of a continued series of enhancements. The new First Turn Club and its grandstand will anchor the first turn at Churchill Downs with a 5,100-seat stadium experience and an integrated club space below for up to 2,000 guests.



Over the past decade Populous has been involved in numerous of hospitality projects at Churchill Downs that include The First Turn Club as well as the Homestretch Club (completed in 2022), the Colonnade and Rooftop Terrace (completed in 2018), the Starting Gate Suites (completed in 2017), The Turf Club,

Stakes Room, and Director's Room renovations (completed in 2015), and the upcoming Twin Spires and Paddock Renovation (scheduled for completion in 2024, for the 150th running of the Kentucky Derby).

"Our long-term relationship with Churchill Downs combined with our strong reputation as a trusted advisor on the most iconic venue designs in the world has given us the incredible opportunity to implement a shared vision to enhance the race-day experience at this storied venue," said Mason Paoli, principal at Populous, which provided architectural, interior design and environmental branding services. "From the materials and textures to the thoughtful layout and lighting, the First Turn Experience is a seamless extension of the work we have done throughout our relationship with Churchill Downs and will provide enhanced and new experiences for guests."

The \$90 million First Turn Experience is anchored by its club, a 50,000-square-foot space boasting an approximate 2,000-person capacity with an open floorplan that is at once grand and intimate. Populous designed the modern and sophisticated premium space with a timeless industrial elegance and thoughtful architectural features that seamlessly mix form with function.

Guests are greeted upon entry by a grand central bar featuring a custom mixed metal front and a striking audio/visual experience with its oversized, 360-degree wraparound LED screen visible from any vantage point. Custom brass shelving above the bar features layers of live mint plants and countless varieties of bourbon -- an homage to the traditional mint julep beverages served on race days. Additional monitors are positioned throughout the space while a sprawling glass front offers guests incredible sightlines to the track's first turn further maximizing the viewing potential.

Meaningful design touches include the dramatic exposed black ceiling adorned with twinkling lights and decorative vintage light fixtures with equestrian styling, which emphasize the more intimate hospitality areas. The design features traditional finishes juxtaposed with industrial details. Oversized vintage images from historic races provide storytelling moments throughout, and dark walnut and mixed metals such as warm brass, bronze, and steel create an industrial elegance. A distinctive diamond patterned metal bar is inspired by historic mutuels, or wagering windows, while walnut cladding helps add warmth and intimacy, defining the hospitality and food service spaces. Each element plays a part in unifying the design vocabulary of the large space.

"Our work with historic and venerable venues like Churchill Downs is rooted in a shared passion for bringing people together," said Paoli. "One opportunity at the First Turn Club was to create an inviting and intimate space for guests while accommodating the 'back of house' operation required to sustain an elevated level of service and very flexible experience, bringing a fantastic new gathering option to Churchill Downs."

The open floor plan at the First Turn Club is easily transformed to accommodate private events year-round. The sophistication of the Churchill Downs food service offering is unparalleled, and Populous' collaboration with culinary providers and operators ensured the design would suit the needs of such a large hospitality venue including planning for the kitchen, trash disposal and deliveries as well the oversized buffet space.

"There are few venues that can compete with Churchill Downs in terms of historical significance and tried-and-true traditions," said Paoli. "Through our experience we were able to elevate the design and

functionality in a staged approach, to combine 149 years of tradition with contemporary designs that simultaneously celebrate the past and look ahead to the future.”

In addition to the club, the First Turn expansion also includes a new grandstand with 5,100 reserved seats, replacing 3,400 temporary Oaks and Derby seats. The structure employs a cantilevered canopy above the new permanent stadium seats as well as significantly improved amenities on the concourses, enhancing fan experience. The First Turn Club, positioned underneath the grandstand seats, opens to an adjacent trackside viewing terrace. Ample outdoor seating, multiple concourse levels and hospitality amenities with industrial design overtones celebrate the rich history of Churchill Downs while the intuitive floorplan and architectural design accents preserve intimacy and increase flexibility.

“These newly unveiled spaces represent the latest step in the partnership between Populous and Churchill Downs, bringing to life an overall master plan developed by the two in 2016,” said Populous senior principal Kelly Kerns. “Expressing a common design language throughout, the enhancements serve to strengthen guest experience and honor the tradition, heritage and cultural significance of Churchill Downs.”

The final phase of the renovations will include the renovation of the iconic Paddock, which will create another premium guest experience, while also peeling back the layers to restore the historically significant Twin Spires. It is expected to open in 2024, ahead of the 150th running of the Kentucky Derby.

About Populous

Populous is a global design and architecture firm with more than 800 people in over 20 offices spanning four continents, with regional centers in Kansas City, London and Brisbane. Throughout our 40-year history, Populous has delivered energized venues, districts and live events that positively transform cities and enrich communities. Populous was founded on its unique ability to amplify the emotional connections between people and place, and we excel at creating experiences that attract diverse groups of people and generate sustainable economic growth. The firm’s comprehensive services include architecture, interior design, event planning and overlay, branded environments, wayfinding and graphics, planning and urban design, landscape architecture, aviation and transport design, hotels and hospitality, and sustainable design consulting. Populous has been recognized with numerous international design awards, including five National American Institute of Architects awards, and has been listed six times as one of *Fast Company* magazine’s most innovative companies.