

REGIONAL MARKET / MANHATTAN

New Lobby, and Address, for a 1900's Hotel

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The dome over a bar in the Hotel Carlton had been ignored for so long - decades, in fact - that the building's owners were not quite sure what its stained glass looked like. The layers of tobacco tar and dirt were so thick that the dome appeared to have been painted black. In fact, the glass held a cornucopia, its contents depicted in brilliant colors.

Now, after an eight-month restoration, the dome is being reinstalled in the hotel, which is at the corner of Madison Avenue and 29th Street, as part of a five-year, \$60 million renovation of the 12-story building.

Workers are also completing a three-story, 17,000-square-foot addition to the structure that will add a new lobby, with a waterfall, and meeting rooms, and will shift the entrance onto Madison Avenue.

"The address will become 88 Madison Avenue," said Edmund Sulzman, the general manager of the hotel. Previously, the hotel had a small lobby at 88 Madison Avenue. It will be converted to other uses.

The new lobby and restored skylight are the final phase of the renovation of the hotel, which first began operations as the Seville Hotel in 1904, according to Mr. Sulzman. All 311 guest rooms have been refitted at a time when demand for hotel rooms in Manhattan is surging, even as some hotel owners are converting all or part of their properties to full-time residences to take advantage of soaring residential property prices.

According to Marcus & Millichap, a real estate investment banking company, the hotel occupancy rate this year in New York is expected to be 82.7 percent, up from 80.7 percent last year and 75 percent in 2003. The company said that favorable exchange rates were causing a surge in foreign visitors and that domestic travel also remained high.

Although the guest rooms at the Carlton are not a net addition to the city's supply, since most remained available during the renovation, they have moved from a budget category to a more high-priced one. "We are going from a two-star to a four-star hotel," Mr. Sulzman said.

The new lobby and meeting rooms were made possible by the demolition of two three-story office buildings to the south of the hotel, at the southwest corner of 29th and Madison. The effect is to transform it into a J-shaped building with most of the guest rooms in a midblock section between 29th and 28th Streets.

The area was a fashionable one in the early decades of the last century, Mr. Sulzman said, although the Seville could not compete with the grandeur of the original Waldorf-Astoria a few blocks away, where the Empire State Building now stands at 34th Street and Fifth Avenue.

Over time the hotel changed owners and gradually deteriorated, Mr. Sulzman said, until the late 1990's, when the Wolfson family took control of the property and began the renovation of the Beaux-Arts-style building. The addition is expected to open later this month.



The glass dome topped a gentlemen's barroom at a time when smoking was fashionable, and the result was a heavy layer of dirt and residue, said Patrick Clark of Sunlites Stained Glass of Rockaway Park, Queens, which dismantled and restored the 16-panel fixture.

"It had been boarded up since the 1940's, and it was severely damaged," he said. "The inside was so covered with soot that you could not see the color in the glass. It looked black."

The top, he said, was covered with debris, and evidence was discovered that not much maintenance had been done for a long time. "We found a hand-blown Edison light bulb up there," he said.

He said about 80 pieces of glass out of hundreds in the panels were missing or so shattered they could not be repaired. Glass with minor cracking was repaired with adhesives. "We had about 170 pieces that were cracked and were fixed," he said.

Mr. Clark said he was convinced that some of the glass came from the glassworks of Louis Comfort Tiffany, although it cannot be proved. "In those days Tiffany had his furnace in Corona, Queens, and I think the colored panels came from there," he said. "The clear panels came from a company in Kokomo, Ind."

Slight details in the way glass is formed can give clues to its origin, Mr. Clark said. For example, the individual grapes - known as jewels to glass workers - show cut marks. "That probably means they are Czech," he said. "At that time, Tiffany was pressing them. These are sharp cut jewels."

Because of its size and age, Mr. Clark said, the skylight is a significant addition to the city's public art. "This is the single most important turn-of-the-century glass being provided for the public," he said.

The restored 200-square-foot dome will be located over a renovated space in the old building that is being converted into a 168-seat restaurant and bar. The restaurant is to be called Country and will be operated by Geoffrey Zakarian, who also operates Town in the Chambers Hotel.

Once the new building is completed, hotel managers are planning to add a European-style spa and are eyeing the roof of the original building for further development. As the building becomes less of a construction site and more an upscale hotel, room rates are likely to increase.

"Since the guest rooms were finished two years ago, we have offered people a great deal," Mr. Sulzman said, with nightly rates of \$159 to \$209. (The average nightly rate in Manhattan last year was \$185.50, according to Lodging Investment Advisors, a consulting company.)

"That will probably go up," Mr. Sulzman said.