

The Plaza: The Most Famous Hotel in the World?
By Stanley Turkel, MHS, ISHC

The famous Plaza Hotel is scheduled to reopen at the end of 2007 with a 100 year anniversary celebration. This \$350 million renovation will contain 130 rooms and 152 condo-hotel units. Prices for the 152 condominium suites range from \$1.6 million to more than \$9 million which works out to \$3800 to \$6000 per square foot. Mike Naftali of Elad Properties, which is redeveloping the Plaza Hotel, is focusing on the most expensive condos with prices starting at \$1.6 million for a one-bedroom suite. Elad is betting that the top end of the market will remain very strong with record Wall Street bonuses and high hedge-fund performance that could continue into 2009. Furthermore, there's a tremendous pool of buyers from the business and financial world, prosperous retirees empty nesters and baby boomers. The hotel portion, to be managed by Fairmont Hotels & Resorts, will have HDTV's wireless Internet access and a touch-screen for ordering room service, retrieving a car from the valet and making dinner reservations.

In addition, the completely-renovated Plaza will contain 182 unfurnished private residence condominiums starting at \$2.5 million and high-end retail stores. The fabled food and beverage outlets: the Palm Court, the Oak Bar and Oak Room and the Edwardian Room will be restored including a replica of the original stained glass ceiling in the Palm Court. A 1921 addition to the hotel blocked the natural light and the skylight itself was removed during World War II to prevent it from being a beacon during air raids. The new plan calls for artificial lights above the glass ceiling to create the impression of sunlight.

Hopefully, these renovations will restore it to its original grandeur when it opened on October 1, 1907. The Plaza Hotel was designed by Henry Janeway Hardenbergh, who was already well known for the Dakota Apartments, one of the first luxury apartment buildings in New York. The Plaza had 800 rooms, 500 bathrooms, large private suites, 10 elevators a two-story ballroom and the Palm Court with a Tiffany leaded glass-domed ceiling. On this same site, an earlier Plaza Hotel opened in 1890 with 400 rooms but was demolished 17 years later for the 18 story current Plaza Hotel.

The New York Landmarks Preservation Commission recently recommended the approval of a waiver that will allow 39,000 square feet of commercial space. It gave permission to make changes to the exterior of the building including adding a new entrance for the stores. The commission also bestowed landmark status on eight of the hotel's famous public rooms, adjacent corridors and vestibules, including murals, chandeliers and decorative metalwork. The rooms include the Palm Court, the setting for a scene from the movie "The Great Gatsby"; the Terrace Room, where Marilyn Monroe's dress strap once slipped off her shoulder during an interview; the Oak Bar, where Cary Grant's character was kidnapped in Alfred Hitchcock's "North by Northwest". Walter Matthau in "Plaza Suite" and Barbra Streisand in "The Way We Were" used the Plaza as a stage set. The Plaza in 1930 was the backdrop in a scene for "No Limit", the first talking picture filmed on location in New York City. Its star was the famous "It Girl", Clara Bow.

Of all the show people who have been part of the Plaza's history, only one has a permanent monument there. He's an American theatrical icon named George M. Cohan who was an actor, composer, playwright, producer, theater owner and a legend; the only person ever awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for a song, the World War I favorite "Over There". The Plaza is the only 10 minutes away from Broadway and it was a convenient place for him to unwind before the curtain went up on the evening performance. From 4 PM to 7 PM each day, he had pre-theater cocktails in the Oak Room where his reserved table was a booth in the northwest corner. After he died in the early '40's, the Lambs Club put a bronze plaque on the wall above his booth which reads, "Here in this corner where he spent many happy hours, the Lambs have placed this tablet in honor of the most brilliant and versatile gentleman in the theatre of his day, George M. Cohan". The Plaza, then owned by Conrad Hilton, officially named the Oak Room's northwest corner, "The Cohan Corner". In 1959, the municipal statue of Cohan was finally erected in Duffy Square on Broadway between forty-sixth and forty-seventh streets- the same site that had earlier been proposed for General William Tecumseh Sherman's monument which now stands in Grand Army Plaza opposite the Plaza Hotel. Will "The Cohan Corner" survive the current renovation?

For nearly 40 years, the Persian Room, a legendary nightclub at the Plaza, presented the most talented live performers. It opened on April 1, 1934, four months after the repeal of Prohibition, in the southern half of the Fifth Avenue dining room. It was designed in Art Deco style by the Viennese designer Joseph Urban with murals by Lillian Gaertner Palmedo. Until it closed in 1975, the Persian Room featured such stars as Liberace, Carol Channing, Burl Ives, Eddy Duchin, Kitty Carlisle, the Mills Brothers, Bob Fosse, Victor Borge, Marge and Gower Champion, Eddie Fisher, Xavier Cugat, the McGuire Sisters, Dinah Shore, Vic Damone, Bob Hope, Robert Goulet, Frankie Laine, Ethel Merman, Eartha Kitt, Henny Youngman and Hildegard, among others.

In 1943, the Plaza was sold to Conrad Hilton for \$7.4 million after thirty-six years of continuous original ownership. Hilton made important physical changes:

- removed the brokerage firm of E. F. Hutton from its ground-floor office (monthly rent \$416) and converted it to the Oak Bar
- converted a basement storage area (once the Grill Room) into the Rendez-vous supper club
- mezzanine writing rooms overlooking the lobby were converted into private meeting rooms
- vitrines were installed throughout the lobby.
- The leaded-glass dome over the Palm Court was removed.

Hilton sold the Plaza to the Boston industrialist A.M. Sonnabend for \$15 million in 1953 whose Hotel Corporation of America (HCA) kept the legend alive until 1975. Harry Mullikin of Western International Hotels (later Westin) bought the Plaza from HCA in 1975 for \$25 million after owning the 1000 room Savoy-Plaza Hotel until it was demolished to make way for the General Motors Building on the east side of Fifth Avenue at 59th Street. Incidentally, the Savoy Plaza was built in 1927 on the site of the old Savoy Hotel which was designed by McKim, Mead & White in 1890.

In 1988, Donald Trump purchased the Plaza for \$390 million. Trump said “This isn’t just a building, it’s the ultimate work of art- it’s the Mona Lisa. I’m in love with it.” With his then-wife, Ivana, Trump revitalized the hotel with careful renovation of the lobby, banquet rooms and certain suites.

In 1995, Trump sold the Plaza to Prince Alwalid bin Talal bin Abdulaziz Saud, partial owner of Fairmont Hotels and CDL Hotels for \$325 million.

As Curtis Gathje wrote in “At the Plaza: An Illustrated History of the World’s Most Famous Hotel” (St. Martin’s Press, New York 2000) “Thanks to a number of serendipitous events- a prime location, visionary builders and management, and most recently, the movies—the Plaza has become the most famous hotel in the world. That it has maintained its dignity and reputation over the century is the most remarkable thing about it.”

Will the new Plaza continue to be the most famous hotel in the world?

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