

**The YMCA's of Greater New York:
Venerable, Substantial and Relatively Unknown Part I
By Stanley Turkel, MHS, ISHC**

In 1979, the singing group, the Village People, scored their biggest all-time hit in the form of “YMCA”, a disco smash recording. The band promoted the song with a dance routine that features hand signals illustrating the letters of the title. This caught on at discos around the world and has since become a part of pop-culture folklore. Anytime the song is played on a dance floor, it's a safe bet that many people will perform the dance routine with the appropriate YMCA hand signals.

Y.M.C.A.

“Young man, there's no need to feel down.
I said, young man, pick yourself off the ground.
I said, young man, 'cause you're in a new town

There's no need to be unhappy.
Young man, there's a place you can go.

I said, young man, when you're short on your dough.
You can stay there, and I'm sure you will find
Many ways to have a good time.

It's fun to stay at the Y-M-C-A
It's fun to stay at the Y-M-C-A”

Believe it or not, the YMCA has been operating hotels in New York City for more than 150 years. At present, they operate five hotels containing 1200 rooms housed in landmark buildings with world-class athletic and fitness centers that surpass most private competitive facilities. Its performance is not reported by Smith Travel Research or any other data-gathering organization.

In the intervening years, the YMCA has evolved as a flexible organization serving people of both genders, all ages, races, and religious beliefs. Its history is one of responding energetically and consistently to the times and the changing needs of its constituents and communities.

From its initial evangelical Christian orientation, the YMCA has grown to be a secular, values-oriented organization with a special focus on positive development in city youth. Historically it has served the urban poor as well as the middle class with programs ranging from educational courses and employment bureaus to gymnasiums and resident accommodations. Some people interpret “YMCA” to mean that YMCAs are only for “young Christian men.” Not true. Despite its name, the YMCA is not just for the young, not just for men and not just for Christians. All ages, all religions, all genders are welcome at the YMCA.

There are currently five YMCA properties in the New York area providing accommodations for transient guests. These YMCA’s house both male and female guests who are interested in finding safe, clean, affordable and centrally located guest room facilities, fitness centers and restaurants. Guest rooms at the YMCA are singles and twin rooms (bunk beds) with shared bathroom facilities located down the corridors. There are a limited number of premium rooms with double beds and rooms with private baths at an additional cost. Amenities include daily housekeeping service, all linens and towels, 24 hours security, complimentary use of the fitness facilities, handicapped-accessible rooms, color TV, air conditioning, safe deposit boxes, electronic door locks, guest laundry room. Other amenities at various facilities include: luggage storage, international café/ restaurant with room service available, concierge service including tours and information, maps and brochures, airport transfers, swimming pool, steam room and sauna, weight room and gymnasium.

In the United States, many YMCA’s include dormitory rooms for members. The first was in Chicago, with rooms “intended for the use of young men who could not afford more ample accommodations.” Staying at a YMCA has been part of the American way of life.

West Side YMCA – 480 Rooms

The world's largest YMCA opened to the public on Monday, March 31, 1930. It was designed by Architect Dwight James Baum who had previously worked on the Hotel McAlpin on Herald Square, on one hundred private homes and a country club called Fieldston in Riverdale, N.Y., and a one million-dollar residence for John and Mable Ringling in Sarasota, Florida. Baum chose twelfth-century design elements for the new West Side Y building with both North Italian Gothic and Romanesque detailing. Other similar buildings were built in New York at the time: the Shelton Hotel (now the Marriott East), the Lombardy Hotel (on East 56th Street) and the Barbizon Hotel on East 63rd Street. The new West Side Y remained true to the original YMCA mission of 1844: a home away from home, a haven for young men from out-of-town. It was a country boy's means of establishing an urban life by making and meeting friends in a spacious and comfortable lobby or in the men's Social Room. It was a private place to gather and to read, talk and listen to the radio. On Monday and Thursday afternoons from 5:30 to 6:30 pm, tea was served and somebody played the piano. On Thursdays at 7:30 PM people gathered for recreational group singing.

The West Side Y has two swimming pools: the Pompeiian pool (75' x 25') with glazed Italian tiles and natural light from tall windows above and below the balconies. The slightly smaller Spanish pool (60' x 20') is surfaced with Andalusian tiles of rich cobalt blue flecked with yellow, a gift from the Spanish government. The Y has three gymnasiums, one with a running track above; five handball/racquetball/ squash courts, two group exercise studios, a 2400 sq. ft. free weight room, a boxing room with both heavy and speed bags, stretching and martial arts rooms, mediation studio for yoga and mediation classes. The cardiovascular center is the second largest in the U.S. including Life Fitness and Star Trac treadmills, Lifecycle bicycles, Versa Climber, Life Fitness cross trainers, Pre-Cor elliptical machines, stair climbers, 25 pieces of Cybex weight equipment, etc.

There are group exercise classes in afro-jazz, aero-box, boot camp, mohabatt love dance, one step beyond, neuro-muscular integrated activity, spinning, feldenkrais method, tai chi chuan, karate, yoga, etc. The building also houses the jewel-box Little Theater, where one-time resident Tennessee William's play "Summer and Smoke" was presented in 1952.

Any number of famous people have stayed at the West Side Y while establishing their careers, among them Fred Allen, John Barrymore, Montgomery Clift, Lee J. Cobb, Kirk Douglas, Eddie Duchin, Douglas Fairbanks, Dave Garroway, Bob Hope, Elia Kazan, Jack Kerouac, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dan Rather, Norman Rockwell, Andy Rooney, Robert Penn Warren, Johnny Weismuller and Malcolm X.

Nearly seventy-five years after opening, the West Side Y's 480 guest rooms are still popular with young and international travelers as well as for domestic travel groups. A recent renovation to the bathrooms reflects an important amenity improvement that will be installed on the remainder of the West Side Y's floors and ultimately to the other New York City YMCA's. The shared bathroom facilities on the twelfth and thirteenth floors have been converted to twenty-two private bathrooms, each with a stall shower, toilet, wash basin, good lighting, mirror, electrical outlet, hooks and new colorful tile from floor to ceiling. These locked private bathrooms are accessible only with the guests' electronic room key card. These bathrooms are better than country club standard.

Vanderbilt YMCA – 367 Rooms

Located on Manhattan's fashionable East Side at 224 East 47th Street, the Vanderbilt Y building has a classic design near its neighbors, which include the United Nations and Grand Central Station. Over the doorway of the Vanderbilt Y these words are etched into the stone: "Railroad Branch Young Mens Christian Association".

The New York Railroad YMCA's started under Cornelius Vanderbilt II's leadership in 1875, had grown enormously, spreading from Manhattan and the Bronx to Brooklyn and Queens. The national YMCA, invited by railway companies to establish branch hotels at their expense, was operating 150 of them with 37,000 members in 1900. The Association regarded work among the one million railway workers as a high calling. Trainmen with layovers in unfamiliar cities had a great need for clean lodgings and tasty food.

In 1901, a Y publication said, "the railroad men of this country form one of the most important classes of the population... Great consequences to the corporation and to the public depend on

the steadiness, sobriety, morality and fidelity of these men.” The Railroad Y’s also ensured that the men would make it to work by giving them a wake-up call. Over time, Railroad Y branches were built in Long Island City, the Pennsylvania Terminal, Grand Central Depot, Thirtieth Street depot (for freight men working for the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad), 361 Madison Ave and Forty-Fifth street (where the Roosevelt Hotel now stands).

The new Railroad YMCA on east 47th Street opened in 1932 at a cost of \$1.5 million between Second and Third Avenues. (In 1972, its name was changed to honor Cornelius Vanderbilt). Chauncey DePew, president of the New York Central Railroad spoke at the new building’s opening: “To many of these men are entrusted the lives of the hundred million passengers who annually travel over the railways of the country,” he declared. “The demand for speed constantly increases the danger of accident. The steady hand and clear brain of the locomotive engineer, of the switchman at the crossing, of the flagman at the curve, of the signal man at the telegraph, alone prevent unutterable horrors. This Association does more in fitting men to fulfill these duties for the safety of the public, than all the patent appliances of the age.” On a more personal note, DePew reflected that he belonged to five of the best-appointed private clubs in New York and there was no clubhouse in the city as well appointed as this... Few of his clubs, he noted, had a bowling alley and not one had a gymnasium. “There are only three which have rooms where their members can sleep and none of them has as many as this... the library downstairs has twice as many books as the University Club possesses”. The building has a full-sized gymnasium, a modern four-lane indoor swimming pool with a one-meter diving board. There are shower rooms for men and women; weight training and exercise rooms; and massage, sunlamp and sauna departments. Many members participate in the physical fitness programs annually: basketball, fitness classes, jogging, handball, paddleball, yoga, weightlifting, scuba diving, karate, volleyball, etc.

If you watched the elevators unload each morning in the Vanderbilt lobby, you would think that the Y was the United Nations. In fact, the number of foreign visitors staying at the Vanderbilt has increased so consistently that it is the foremost International Center on Manhattan’s east side. The location makes the Vanderbilt extremely popular among students and young adults from the United States and overseas. Railroad men from the Penn Central’s Hudson, Harlem and New

Haven divisions still continue to make up a substantial percentage of the Y's overnight guests. They account for 18,000 room occupancies per year.

The Vanderbilt's spacious, air-conditioned restaurant serves breakfast, lunch and dinner from Monday through Friday. The facility seats 122 persons and serves more than 250,000 meals per year.

Stanley Turkel, MHS, ISHC, is a New York-based hotel consultant specializing in franchising issues and asset management. He is a member of the prestigious International Society of Hospitality Consultants. If you need help with a franchising problem such as encroachment/impact, termination/ liquidated damages or litigation support, don't hesitate to call 917-628-8549 or stanturkel@aol.com.