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Manhattan Landmark Revamps for Retail

Former AT&T building undergoes \$47 million restoration of the first floor



The building at 195 Broadway in Manhattan. PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **KEIKO MORRIS**

Massive Doric columns aren't usually the preferred architectural features for retail spaces, but in the case of one Manhattan landmark they have become a selling point.

The owners of the historic American Telephone & Telegraph Company Building at 195 Broadway have completed a \$47 million restoration and renovation of the first floor, creating high-end retail space and opening up an interior that largely has been closed to the public for decades.

Next year, access to the lobby will be routine, as people make their way to the glass-enclosed spaces leased by Japanese restaurant Nobu and retailer Anthropologie.

“You will always be able to see the forest of columns,” said David Levinson, chief executive of L&L Holding Co., which bought the building in 2005. He added, “The lobby is truly one of the great architectural treasures of New York City.”



A statue at the entrance to the retail spaces in the renovated lobby of the building at 195 Broadway. PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Designed in the vein of Greek and Egyptian temples, the building’s first-floor interior was intended to signify “quality, durability and permanence,” reflecting the phone company’s “commitment to public service,” according to documents prepared for the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. The building, constructed between 1912 and 1922, served as [AT&T Inc.](#)’s headquarters until 1983, according to city documents.

Rows of cream-colored marble columns populate the first floor, and the 29-foot-high coffered ceilings are painted with gold stars. The lobby is filled with decorative touches, including an ornate marble mailbox and 40 restored bronze and alabaster chandeliers, which cost \$35,000 each back in 1917, according to L&L.

A bronze and marble sculpture called “Service to the Nation in Peace and War” also commands attention. Symbolizing telecommunication, the classical male figure wears headphones and carries telephone cables.

Many retailers typically opt for white-box spaces, but Nobu and Anthropologie embraced the historic environs as a way to make a statement. Nobu will create a bar in between the columns with a large sculptural piece inspired by a calligraphy brush stroke hanging above it.



The ceiling with a sunburst design based on ancient Egyptian art and Doric columns in the renovated lobby of the building at 195 Broadway. PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Anthropologie has designed an elaborate fixture sculpture “that dances around each column, adding to their beauty,” said Missy Peltz, Anthropologie’s chief creative officer, in an email. “This building is a true gem,” she said. “We couldn’t pass it up. The historical nature of the space was the most compelling feature.”

The renovation and restoration process stretched out over the last decade, starting when L&L bought the building. At the time, the tower had been proposed as a landmark, Mr. Levinson said. L&L worked with the city preservation agency to landmark the space.

“We said we would like to make this a public place and support the landmarking of the interior,” Mr. Levinson said, “but we want to have a master plan, a comprehensive understanding of how we could use the space for retail.”

Much of the restoration and renovation work is invisible. L&L accessed spaces above the ornate coffered ceilings to remove asbestos, put in sprinkler systems and install updated wiring, Mr. Levinson said.

The three first-floor retail spaces—one is still available for lease—are delineated by 178 large, heavy pieces of glass that hang from the ceiling and fit together with bronze clips. Most of the panels are 1-inch thick. The largest are about 9 feet by 18 feet and weigh 1,600 pounds.

“We made slits in 100-year-old plaster,” Mr. Levinson said, explaining the complex process of installing the glass panels. “You’d have to be a plastic surgeon to do it.”



The lobby of the building at 195 Broadway. PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

An interior galleria passageway will allow people to go from store to store inside the building.

Anthropologie and Nobu will set up shop on the first floor and lower level. Nobu will relocate its original Tribeca restaurant and annex space called Nobu Next Door at 195 Broadway, allowing it to expand.

At street level, a lounge area will surround an onyx bar that will be backlit. The large windows will feature screens of hand-dyed rope in reds and blues, said David Rockwell, president and founder of the Rockwell Group, who designed the restaurant with his team.

Stairs leading to the larger subterranean dining area and sake room will have a wall covered in river rock on one landing.

“There is something about being in a building that has this amazing history and creating a use that puts it in the present and the future,” Mr. Rockwell said.