

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## The Waldorf Astoria Is Set to Reopen Soon. How Do You Renovate a Classic?

How does a designer make a classic hotel feel fresh and modern, while also respecting what came before? We took a deeper look at the renovations of three grandes dames to find out.



Even a grande dame needs an occasional makeover. But renovating a legendary hotel comes with [a lot of pressure](#). To better understand the process of giving an old mainstay new life, we interviewed interior designers who have recently renovated some big-name hotels.





## **A Manhattan Icon: Waldorf Astoria, New York**

Closed for renovation since 2017, the [Waldorf Astoria](#) has, in its 93-year history, hosted every president from Hoover to Obama. Three of them even moved in after leaving office.

“But the Waldorf had lacked, let’s say, improvements, for many, many years,” said Ray Gu, project director at Dajia Insurance Group, which took control of the designated landmark building that was [bought by China’s Anbang Insurance Group](#) in 2015. But who should lead such a weighty project?

“Forty years ago, my wife and I were standing in the Waldorf’s lobby. I turned to her and said, ‘I want to redesign this. Why is it so dark in here?’ ” recalled [Pierre-Yves Rochon](#) who, given his vast experience spiffing up hotels like Paris’s Four Seasons George V, was chosen to restore the Waldorf to its former glory.

Nearly eight years into what was projected to be a four-year renovation, the end is in sight. More than 6,000 noise-friendly windows have been replaced, but look unchanged from the 1931 originals; longtime Waldorf resident Cole Porter’s Steinway piano (an unfortunate victim of late-night cocktail spillage) has been refurbed; the clock commissioned by Queen Victoria in 1893 will soon shine bright in the lobby again. The Waldorf Astoria is now slated for a spring 2025 reopening.



“I tried to draw away all the curtains and darkness left over from the ’80s and bring the light,” Rochon said. The almost-reawakened Park Avenue hotel’s 375 rooms, pared down from more than 1,400 (most of which had too-tiny bathrooms, in Rochon’s view) will be among the largest in the city. Another section is being converted into condos.

Rochon thought the hotel lobby, often a hive of frenzied activity, didn’t lend itself to the leisurely linger. “Not chic,” Rochon said. The area’s sea of 16 check-in stations has now been reduced to just a handful, complete with 1930s-looking couches.

“I was stressed out about not ruining the Waldorf,” Rochon admitted. “The luxe, the New York elegance—we kept all that. I hope.”



### **Just Like in the Movies: La Mamounia, Marrakesh, Morocco**

Alfred Hitchcock filmed 1956’s “The Man Who Knew Too Much” at this hotel near Marrakesh’s medina. More recently, [La Mamounia](#) featured in [Netflix](#)’s “Inventing Anna.” That history, plus a propensity to host movie stars, prompted the design duo Jouin Manku to add a swank velvet-seated cinema to the grounds, part of a three-year renovation that ended in late 2023. The theater screens films like Hitchcock’s twice daily; concessions include pastries by the chef Pierre Hermé.

The designers’ first priority, however, was to restore a long-faded watering hole. “The old Churchill Bar wasn’t working. But not strictly because of the decor—it was simply too big,” designer Patrick Jouin said.

They reconfigured the hotel bar into a smaller, darker, sexier iteration with rounded ceiling edges meant to mimic a train coach, a nod to the fact that Morocco's national railway developed the hotel a century ago. They illuminated the space with the green banker's lamps one might spot in the office of a [London barrister](#). Perhaps the bar's namesake had one on his Downing Street desk, where he worked in between seasonal stints painting and drinking at La Mamounia.

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### **Shaken or Stirred: The Dorchester, London**

Pierre-Yves Rochon likes to begin his research by trying to understand what a hotel was like during its heyday. For [London's Dorchester](#), opened in 1931, that meant the 1930s, his favorite design decade, and 1940s.

Ian Fleming, author of the James Bond novels, often came to the hotel in the 1940s to play bridge, and this is where he invented Bond's favorite tippie, the oft-requested Vesper Martini. Rochon wanted to make sure that, were he around today, Fleming would recognize the Promenade, the hotel's high-tea thoroughfare.

Before the top-to-toe renovation, started in 2021 and wrapping up in 2025 (the hotel has remained open), few travelers bothered to slog to the Champagne bar at the far end of the Promenade, Rochon says. "It's a bit of a long journey. Plus it was very dark and sad at the end."

While researching the hotel's history, Rochon happened upon some photos of Lalique crystal, and decided to follow suit when fashioning a light-infused, glowy new bar unveiled last year. Rochon also adhered a great many mirrored tiles to the ceiling to cut the perception of the long distance down the hallway—and to afford guests a little preview of what awaits, including Liberace's now-even-more-sparkly piano. "Now if you sit to have a drink and happen to spot a beautiful girl on the other side of the Artists' Bar, nobody will catch you noticing her," Rochon said. "You could, in theory, be watching the pianist."