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A Look Inside Waldorf Astoria New York's Eight-Year, \$2 Billion Revival

The grand dame is finally ready for its next chapter. But competing with Manhattan's best will be a matter of embracing both its past and the present.

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Impressions: 18,977,422



The the lobby, with the Cole Porter piano and iconic clock. Photographer: Seth Caplan for Bloomberg Pursuits

When the Waldorf Astoria New York opened on Oct. 1, 1931, it was “the biggest and most elegant and luxurious hotel in the world.” That’s according to the gregarious Italian who runs it today, managing director Luigi Romaniello.

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He's spent much of his tenure at the Waldorf revisiting its history. After all, it's been closed for the entire time that Romaniello has been on the job. But now he's ready to cut the ribbon on the hotel's next chapter.

As the last journalist to walk the building (and explore its secret spaces) before it closed in 2017 for an eight-year renovation, I was honored when Romaniello invited me to also be one of the first to see the hotel's reimagination. The project was no mere cosmetic brush-up—it cost \$2 billion according to many estimates. (Renovation costs have been reported by the *Wall Street Journal* and others, but Hilton would not confirm the figure.)

What Anbang Insurance Group Co. (which bought the Waldorf for nearly \$2 billion in 2014) and Hilton Worldwide Holdings (which manages it) have accomplished is a feat of intricate preservation work and timeless design that will doubtless go down in history. But it would have gone down in history one way or another—after all, the hotel is an icon, an indelible part of the fabric of New York.

Its opening was marked by a presidential address (over the radio) by Herbert Hoover, and the wheelchair-bound Franklin Delano Roosevelt had a discreet, accessible entrance built into its basement level. After its opening in 1931, every US president slept there while visiting New York—a practice that lasted until the Obama years, when the Chinese ownership created concerns about espionage risks.



A section of the opened-up lobby, where offices used to be; the bar at Lex Yard. Photographer: Seth Caplan for Bloomberg Pursuits

A History of Grand Ambitions

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Romaniello's "biggest and most elegant" assessment may sound like marketing speak, but in the case of the Waldorf, the superlatives are warranted. It really did reinvent what it meant to be a hotel when it opened almost a century ago, with its grand interior allée spanning the city block bound by Lexington and Park Avenues and 49th and 50th streets. The original build cost an estimated \$28 million—an amount that would translate to nearly \$6 billion with inflation today—and was completed in just one year.

But the grand dame of Manhattan had grown tired by the time she closed up shop in her 86th year, and nobody of great influence was staying there anymore. Her cavernous lobby, when I walked through it that last time, felt somewhat sad and soulless, the hotel's starring role in New York culture long usurped by younger, prettier things.

If you walk into the Waldorf Astoria today—it opens officially in mid-July, with rooms from around \$1,595 a night—you'll see a lobby that's been restored to its original 1931 proportions. (It's a full 5,180 square feet.) Over the years, interior walls had been added, making space for offices around the perimeter and cutting off enormous windows that now flood the space with soft natural light. In the place of those offices you'll now find a generous living-room-like check-in and concierge area on one side and the stunning Peacock Alley bar on the other. The menu there is by Jeff Bell, the cocktail savant behind PDT in the East Village, with a giant mural of white peacocks perched on floral branches across the back of the bar.

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Peacock Alley. Photographer: Seth Caplan for Bloomberg Pursuits

Between the two spaces are, yes, the hotel's 11-foot-tall, gilded clock—commissioned originally by Queen Victoria ahead of the 1893 World Expo in Chicago—and Cole Porter's Steinway piano. If either of those historic fixtures had disappeared, loyalists and preservationists would have started a riot.

Yet those overseeing the renovation knew they couldn't get stuck in a time warp. "You're at risk of never moving forward if you're always looking back," Dino Michael, global head of luxury brands for Hilton Worldwide, told me over lunch almost a year ago when we first discussed the renovation project to end all renovation projects. "We needed this to be a modern classic, but we also couldn't feel afraid to be whimsical and playful."

That balance of heritage and modern sensibility is, in a nutshell, what's so special about the new Waldorf Astoria. And still, its success will hinge on filling these enormous, even-grander-than-before spaces with locals and visitors alike. Persuading trend-obsessed locals to come back to the reputationally damaged Waldorf won't just be a matter of highlighting everything that's new about the place. It'll also be about

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reminding them how few spots still exist in Manhattan where you can simultaneously feel part of the city's history and its future.

Windows Onto a Changing World

The hotel's history actually goes back further than its first "grand reopening" in 1931. It started out as two hotels, the Waldorf and the Astoria (hence the mashed-up name) built side by side in 1893 and 1897 on the site of what's now the Empire State Building. To make space for that landmark, the hotel was moved in 1931 to its current location. (The Hotel Chelsea is its only real rival in terms of historical clout; it opened in 1884 and was reborn to great critical success in 2022.)



The Waldorf's facade through the decades. Shown right is the latest version, with the Spirit of Achievement sculpture—a sort of mascot for the property—newly restored and mounted on the Park Avenue entrance. Source: Courtesy of Hilton College, University of Houston; Photograph by Seth Caplan for Bloomberg Pursuits

The outside of the hotel hasn't changed all that much in the ensuing decades—it's a landmark, after all—but as part of the renovation, all 5,584 windows were removed and replaced with replicas of the originals, of which only one had remained. The new ones have narrower aluminum frames, painted to match an original gray color identified through microscopic analysis; they're also double-glazed for better soundproofing.

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"You'd never notice the change of a single window," Romaniello says. "But all together it significantly impacts the look of the entire façade. It's one example of how we captured every imperfection and corrected it." (All 1,370,000 bricks on the façade were also individually replaced or cleaned up.)

If the building itself hasn't evolved, the world around it sure has. When the Waldorf-Astoria was erected, Park Avenue wasn't a major thoroughfare but rather Railroad Alley, a no-man's-land characterized by train yards and power plants that fed into Grand Central Station. Now I can watch the midday, midweek, Midtown bustle unfold—none of it audible—from inside a plush guest room.



Even the elevators are landmarked, and their restoration brings them back to their former glory. Photographer: Seth Caplan for Bloomberg Pursuits

1.6 Million Square Feet of Hotel (and Some Condos Too)

I've toured a lot of hotels, and I'm not easily impressed by the statistics often used to prove a hotel's scope or ambition. But I'm genuinely floored when Romaniello tells me—as we walk through a labyrinth of interior corridors and stairwells that no guest will ever see—that the hotel has 1.6 million square feet of interior space. Of that, about half is now residential; 633,000 square feet are left for the 375 rooms.

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Mint, sepia and mauve have replaced lipstick red and gold décor. Photographer: Seth Caplan for Bloomberg Pursuits

Each room is now bigger. Out went the old, fusty design—heavily ruched drapery with tiny tassels, lipstick-red sofas and dreaded gold bedspreads—and in have come soft shades of mint and sepia and mauve. Ivory toile wallpaper was stripped and replaced with 122 shades of paint, many of them varieties of eggshell and taupe. Recessed bookshelves, black lacquered maxibars and art deco sconces—inspired by original pieces found throughout the hotel—add architectural interest.

In one room, the curve on the chairback in front of a vanity table matches the exact shape of the headboard, indicative of the way every last detail has been considered and customized for all 11 room categories.

But the rooms are not the most visually stimulating part of the hotel. When Romaniello shows me to the Silver Corridor, I gasp. It looks like the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles. (And indeed, that turns out to have been the reference point.) The ceiling arches are lined with 16 murals—eight on each side of the hall—depicting the changing seasons. They were created in the late 1800s by American artist Edward Emerson Simmons and transferred from the Waldorf's original building to this somewhat random space,

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previously a little-used hallway connecting the hotel's public areas to private event spaces.

Until recently they were covered in soot; they've been meticulously cleaned and revitalized by a team of conservators that usually restores paintings for the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "People used to smoke a lot indoors," Romaniello tells me. "We had no idea they'd turn out to have such vivid blues."



The Silver Corridor. Photographer: Seth Caplan for Bloomberg Pursuits

Also restored are sparkling black-and-white checkerboard floors and original chandeliers that drip with nearly 6 feet of crystals. (There are five such fixtures, each with more than 5,300 crystals—amounting to nearly 27,000 glimmering stones in total.) I imagine the whole space set up with a table for 100 guests, maybe for a chef pop-up event, and Romaniello suggests my imagination is on the right track.

Food is a foolproof way into New Yorkers' hearts, and as such it's a big part of the Waldorf's strategy to lure back locals to this corporate Midtown block. Besides Bell, the mixology guru, Hilton has brought on Gramercy Tavern chef Michael Anthony to create Lex Yard, an American brasserie. The restaurant space glows in creams and gold tones and has starry light fixtures; velvety upholstery softens surfaces that range from the chairs to the walls; the columns are fluted and illuminated so that they're fun features rather than structural annoyances.

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As at his Flatiron flagship, Anthony intends for the menu to change in keeping with whatever is overflowing at the Union Square farmers market. He's also in charge of the room service and afternoon tea menus that'll be served elsewhere around the property, just as Bell will create the cocktail menus wherever drinks are served.



Lex Yard, whose interiors are designed by AvroKo. Photographer: Seth Caplan for Bloomberg Pursuits

Anthony is also looking back to look forward. It's said that the Waldorf salad and red velvet cake were born and popularized in this building, so homages to both will likely become kitchen signatures. (The fruit-and-nut salad will have seasonal variations and a lemon-forward vinaigrette to replace the traditional mayo dressing; the cake gets reimagined as a red velvet soufflé tart.) Just as likely to take center stage: loaded-up lobster rolls, towering oyster displays, and herb roasted chicken with salsa verde and shoestring fries.

"An aura that can't be explained"

As Romaniello guides me toward the Park Avenue entrance—whose doors are still concealed by plywood during my January visit—he points down rather than up. "*The Wheel of Life*," he says, naming the 18-foot round mosaic at my feet that comprises 148,000 hand-cut marble tiles from all over the world. It's the work of just a fraction of the 2,000 artisans who worked on the original hotel. (When I ask how many restoration artists it took to return the hotel to glory, Hilton left the answer at "many"—enough that they couldn't tally them up.)

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The Wheel of Life. Photographer: Seth Caplan for Bloomberg Pursuits

It strikes me that most people will step right over this piece of art without stopping to notice its details as they first walk into the new hotel—an indication of just how much history and effort is embedded in every surface. The effect, whether you immediately notice these intricacies or not, will be singular.

“Once you walk into the Waldorf Astoria, your energy rises a few notches. It’s an aura that can’t be explained,” says Romaniello. “It’s the center of New York City.”

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