

August 25, 2025
Financial Times

FINANCIAL TIMES

Inside the Waldorf Astoria New York's spectacular resurrection

*Can an eight-year, \$2bn renovation revive the city's most legendary hotel?
FT architecture critic Edwin Heathcote checks in to find out*

By: Edwin Heathcote
Impressions: 13,448,137



The Waldorf Astoria, New York

Some grand hotels seem to live as much, if not more, in myth than reality. The stories seem too good to be true. At New York's Waldorf Astoria in the 1950s, you might have seen Grace Kelly, or taken in performances by Ella Fitzgerald or Tony Bennett. You

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might have watched sparks fly between John F Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe, encountered Marlene Dietrich, Charlie Chaplin or Harry Truman, or watched mobster Frank Costello emerge from the elevator as former FBI chief J Edgar Hoover ascended another. Cole Porter lived at the hotel for 30 years; his Steinway piano still sits in public view.

For much of the 20th century, the Waldorf Astoria was the locus of Manhattan society and celebrity, its 2,200 rooms inhabited by royalty, mobsters, musicians and statesmen alike. Its famed public spaces, such as the Grand Ballroom and "Peacock Alley" (its ornate central lobby and promenade), were the places to see and be seen, encasing guests in a world of gold, silver, and crystal — a glittering dreamscape of art deco luxury born of the Depression, when this kind of opulence must have seemed even more breathtaking.



A ball at the Waldorf Astoria in 1934 © Ullstein Bild via Getty Images.

In more recent years, that sparkle faded. The hotel went under management of Conrad Hilton in 1949, and was bought fully by Hilton Hotels in 1972. In a series of renovations in the second half of the 20th century, the mosaics and veneers were slowly covered with office carpet, chandeliers supplanted by bleak downlighting and ornamental surfaces covered with painted drywall. The hotel became a pallid, corporate simulacrum of New York's once-grandest site. The April in Paris Balls and Met Galas were replaced by high school proms and corporate awards dinners. China's Anbang

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Insurance Group purchased the hotel in 2014, closing it three years later to begin restoration (it's now owned by Dajia Insurance Group).

Few hotels manage to regain their glamour once it is lost. But after an eight-year closure and a reputed \$2bn renovation, the Waldorf Astoria is glittering again. A soft launch in July saw the opening of its new restaurants, lobby bar and guest rooms, while the whole hotel — ballrooms, spa and all — officially opens on September 1.



Jacqueline Kennedy, Senator John F Kennedy and Mrs. Robert Sargent Shriver at the April in Paris Ball in 1957 © Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

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Actress Marlene Dietrich with Conde Nast Publications president Iva Patcevitch at the April In Paris Ball in 1952 © NY Daily News via Getty Images



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Marilyn Monroe with her husband Arthur Miller at the same ball that John F Kennedy attended in 1957. Sources state that Monroe and Kennedy did not meet that night, but no one really knows © Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

I was among the first few to stay in the revamped hotel before the July opening, roaming its empty corridors, and attended to by dozens of, at the time, underemployed staff. The 47-storey behemoth has recaptured some of the dazzle that had been dispiritingly crushed in recent decades, re-emerging as a determinedly upmarket blast of Midtown deco glamour. Its capacious public spaces are grand again — grand enough to accommodate Manhattan's insatiable desire for display: big, brash and scaled for showing off. Slimmed from its former scale (the hotel had 1,400 rooms when it closed for works in 2017), it now has 375 rooms and suites, with the top floors appropriated as luxury condos. The complex restoration — an almost total internal rebuild — took 10 times longer than the hotel's original construction in 1930-31, and was undertaken by architects SOM, with interiors by Pierre-Yves Rochon.



The hotel's restored art deco facade

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'Like an Astaire and Rogers Hollywood Versailles': the Silver Corridor

To understand the Waldorf Astoria's status, one must rewind a century and walk down to the hotel's original site on Fifth Avenue and 33rd Street. What began as a family feud has become Manhattan legend: in 1893, Gilded Age powerhouse William Waldorf Astor built the Waldorf Hotel. His cousin John Jacob Astor IV promptly opened the rival Astoria on the adjacent lot. Business sense eventually prevailed, and in 1897 the hotels merged, connected by an opulent corridor that the press christened Peacock Alley. It became Manhattan's premier promenade, a place to socialise and be on display, where gentlemen and ladies could perambulate without getting mud on their spats or skirts.

The hotel was demolished to make way for the Empire State Building, and in 1930 construction began on a new Waldorf Astoria on Park Avenue and 49th Street, which would take up a full city block. When it opened a year later, its massive central lobby and lounge took on the name Peacock Alley, after the original. This was the heart of the hotel, home of the famous clock originally gifted by Queen Victoria to the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Over the Hilton decades, Peacock Alley dulled into a dim corporate lobby, a banal space that was reception, bar, transit space and public space — and somehow simultaneously failed at all.

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The hotel's Peacock Alley as it looked in 2008 . . . © Martin Thomas/Alamy



. . . and how it looks post-restoration, with the Victorian clock and Cole Porter's piano in situ © Vero Suh

Post-renovation, its original splendour has returned. Cole Porter's delicate piano sits to one side of the Alley, while the ghastly kitsch of the Lobby Clock still dominates the centre. Sitting in a comfortable velvet club chair, as staff buzzed around a conspicuous lack of guests, I felt it already alive and expectant. Waitresses in sparkling sequined dresses shepherded the action at the bar, shimmering like the Supremes. There was a real sense of anticipation in the air, that something important was being returned to Manhattan.

When the Waldorf Astoria reopened in 1931, it was the biggest hotel in the world. The original site was sold two months after the Wall Street Crash, and construction began in the depths of the Depression — its twin towers and opulence a slap in the face of the economic reality of the time. Its scale was clearly meant to match the Roman grandeur

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of Grand Central's concourse, which its architect, Leonard B Schultze had also crafted. His firm, Schultze & Weaver, were the pre-eminent hotel designers of their era. The hotel's art deco stepped mass, with copper-crowned towers, announced its arrival as a grand urban landmark.



A photo from 1930, while the Waldorf Astoria Hotel was under construction. As the story goes, to show off their quality of service, the hotel devised a publicity stunt in which restaurant wait staff served the steel workers atop the unfinished skyscraper. © Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images



The hotel reopened on Park Avenue in 1931 © Corbis/VCG via Getty Images

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Positioned above the subterranean tracks snaking into Grand Central, this was a hotel for the railway age. It originally had its own rail spur to deliver coal, a line used by Roosevelt at least once to arrive unseen in his wheelchair. (It is all apparently still down there, but my requests to see it were politely refused.)

Guests now arrive through the broad, hollowed-out porte-cochère on 49th Street, the main of three entrances. Reception, which before sat awkwardly in the huge lounge (and looked something like office cubicles), has now been repositioned to a discreet corner. This bit of the lobby feels slightly compacted, the ceilings hovering a little too low, which results in a wild sensation when you move into the lofty new Peacock Alley — a compression and release of Manhattan proportions.

Everywhere, sumptuous art deco details have been restored or replaced. The reliefs on the elevator doors and grilles are exquisite, as is the restored floor mosaic in the Park Avenue lobby. There was anxiety when the hotel closed that these beloved features might be lost. Unusually for New York, much of the interior was landmarked in 2017 to protect it for the future, and so the opposite is the case: much more has been saved and revealed.



The restored floor mosaic in the Park Avenue lobby © Joe Thomas

The rest of the ground floor is occupied by two immense restaurants, keen to make their mark on the Waldorf Astoria's long-standing culinary legacy. Aside from the obvious Waldorf salad, the hotel is also the birthplace of red velvet cake, 24-hour room service and allegedly eggs Benedict. It was also one of the first places in the city to allow women to dine alone.

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The new additions include Lex Yard, a brasserie led by chef Michael Anthony of the Gramercy Tavern, designed by AvroKO, which has an airy retro feel that lands somewhere between cruise liner, nightclub and 1970s Parisian café. It works: even before the opening it was buzzy and vibrant, a large-scale Midtown institution in the making.



Lex Yard, the new brasserie led by chef Michael Anthony © Joe Thomas

A little less sure-footed is the new Japanese restaurant, Yoshoku. It is kaiseki-style, the elaborate multi-course tradition of Japanese fine dining. Looking a bit lost in the vast Park Avenue lobby, it lacks the intimacy one might associate with Japanese food.

The panache of the deco lobbies hasn't quite made it upstairs, where the hotel rooms are larger, fewer and costlier, starting at \$1,500 a night. They are understated and elegant, if not exactly overwhelming in their luxury. (Rochon, the designer, also oversaw the redesign of London's The Ritz and The Dorchester.)

The look, with Rochon's urbane furniture, is a bit grey and milquetoast, but undoubtedly comfortable and considered. The bed was excellent. My grey marble-lined bathroom looked (a bit disconcertingly) directly out on to a huge Midtown office tower. That said, though my room faced the very loud Grand Central, it was absolutely silent. I don't think I've ever experienced such good sound insulation in the city.

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The living room in one of the Waldorf Astoria's suites © Joe Thomas



The hotel's rooms were designed by Pierre-Yves Rochon © Joe Thomas

Deep inside the hotel, the function rooms and the Grand Ballroom look, frankly, astonishing. The ballroom, a vast space now framed by silvery metallic balconies, is a deco dream remade as something far more than the banal box it had become. It cannot have come cheap (the renovation's estimated \$2bn price tag was twice the original estimate for the work) but, with its high-tech stage and equipment, the ballroom will surely return as one of the city's premier venues.

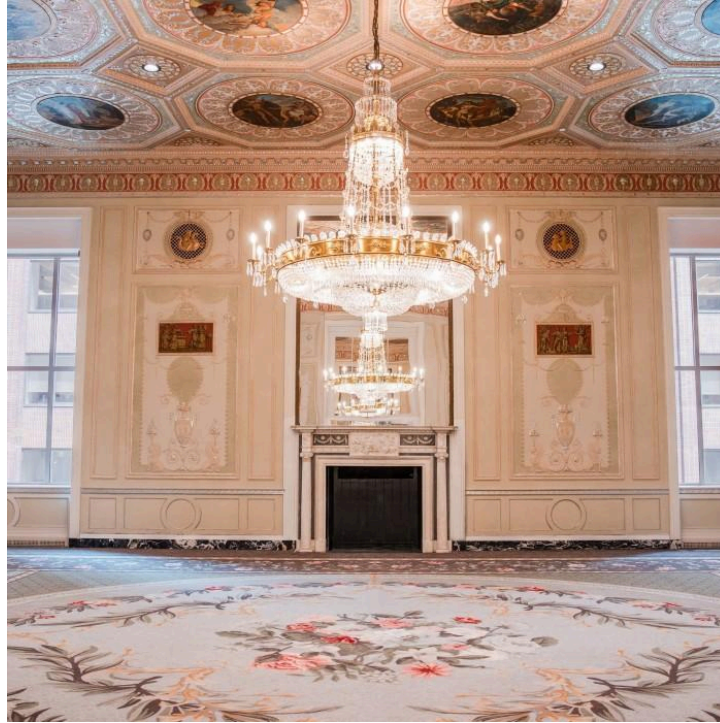
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A rendering of what the hotel's Grand Ballroom may look like filled with tables after it opens in September © Courtesy of Waldorf Astoria New York

More impressive still are the spaces around the ballroom, carefully restored to their 1930s pomp: the Silver Corridor, with its huge chandeliers and kitsch painted panels, looks like an Astaire and Rogers Hollywood Versailles. The Basildon Room highlights original details from the dining room of Basildon Park Manor, an elegant Georgian Palladian English country house near Goring. The rococo ceiling paintings depicting scenes from Dante's *Divine Comedy* are attributed to Angelica Kauffman, a Swiss artist and a rare woman artist working in London and Rome in the late 18th century. The restoration is impeccable and looks suitably expensive.

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The Basildon Room, with its details from a Georgian English country house . . . © Vero Suh



. . . and paintings on the ceiling depicting scenes from Dante's 'Divine Comedy' © Vero Suh

It's difficult to imagine the Waldorf Astoria becoming what it once was: the densest concentration of power and celebrity in the city. Culture now is too atomised, too dispersed. But its spaces are generous, elegant and surprising enough for it to

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contend. If ever there was a hotel where all these astonishing events and people could collide in one huge condenser, this is it.

301 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10022. Rooms from \$1,500. Website; Directions

Edwin Heathcote, the FT's architecture and design critic, stayed as a guest of Waldorf Astoria New York

Have you walked through or stayed in the Waldorf Astoria since it reopened? Do you have any memories of the hotel from before the renovation? Share them in the comments below

<https://www.ft.com/content/1faaa5e2-9500-4817-bdc0-37aba2da024f>