

# LUXURY

## Reviving A Legend

By **Selina Denman**

Impressions: 5,459,564

How do you modernise a building that is steeped in history and ingrained in the collective consciousness? Selina Denman speaks to the designers reshaping New York's Waldorf Astoria to find out

A 110-year-old piano takes pride of place in the Waldorf Astoria sales centre on New York's Park Avenue. The pastoral scenes painted onto the Steinway's cover more than a century ago have been lovingly preserved, as has the piano's unique patina. The instrument, which belonged to American composer and songwriter Cole Porter, a long-time resident at the historic hotel, is just one of many artefacts that pay testament to the property's illustrious history.

"Cole Porter lived in the hotel for 30 years, in a six-bedroom suite, and he used this particular piano to compose many of his most famous works," explains Andrew Miller, US chief executive of Dajia, the Chinese company that now owns the famed New York property. "Frank Sinatra later specifically rented the Cole Porter suite, for the unfathomable sum of \$1 million [Dh3.6m] per year.



*A Steinway piano belonging to Cole Porter, who lived in the Waldorf Astoria for 30 years. Courtesy Selina Denman*

“When we closed the hotel, we went back to Steinway, which thankfully still keeps very detailed records of every piano it has ever manufactured. And we developed a restoration plan for it. The heritage and history are still there to be celebrated and treasured. Which is kind of how we think about all the work we are doing at the Waldorf Astoria.”

Renovation work on New York’s most famous hotel may have halted temporarily following a citywide shutdown to combat the spread of Covid-19, but the building has weathered its fair share of storms since it launched in its current Park Avenue location nearly 90 years ago. The hotel opened its doors in 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression. Spanning an entire city block between Park and Lexington avenues, from 49th to 50th street, it was the tallest and biggest hotel in the world, and soon became the go-to address for New York high society, heads of state, movie stars and musicians. Sinatra got his break singing in the hotel’s Wedgwood Room in the 1940s and returned to live at the property more than 20 years later; Marilyn Monroe stayed for an extended period of time in the 1950s, although, according to biographer Fred Lawrence Guiles:

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“She was often acutely lonely in her Waldorf Towers apartment, as only a famed movie star cut off from ordinary mortals can be.”



*Queen Elizabeth II dined at the property during her first state visit to the US in 1957*

Prince Rainier III of Monaco and Grace Kelly celebrated their engagement at the hotel in 1956; and Queen Elizabeth II dined here during her first state visit to the US in 1957 – feasting on beef Perigourdine with truffle sauce.

The 153,290-square-metre Art Deco building has been closed since 2017, undergoing an extensive restoration project that is seeing its 1,000-plus rooms reconfigured into 375 hotel units and 375 residences. “The building itself is this marvellous Swiss watch of complexity,” notes Miller. “The existing layouts were removed entirely. In order to provide layouts that made sense for today’s lifestyles, more or less everything had to be swept clean.”

The mammoth structure is a New York City landmark, with strict guidelines about what can be modified on the inside and outside. “There are thousands and thousands of exterior landmarks in New York and just over 100 interior landmarks, and this building is both,” explains Frank Mahan, associate director and architect at Skidmore Owings &

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Merrill, the architecture firm tasked with modernising the property. “We have very methodically gone through all the interior spaces and are restoring many of the original materials, while updating those spaces for contemporary expectations.”



*The hotel opened in its current Park Avenue location in 1931*

In the hotel’s Silver Corridor, art-quality restorations are under way on murals that have been in the property since it first opened. “People are scraping away layers of dirt and age, to restore these art pieces back to what they were in 1931,” notes Dan Tubb, senior director of sales at Douglas Elliman, the exclusive marketing and sales agent for the property. “There is also a clock from 1893, which was commissioned by Queen Victoria for the World Fair, that is being lovingly restored. There used to be a saying: ‘Meet me at the clock at the Waldorf Astoria’, and that’s going to come back into this space.” Meanwhile, the exterior will be carefully cleaned and all 5,000 of the property’s windows will be replaced and restored to their original size.

Because the Waldorf Astoria has been such an integral part of the city’s social fabric for so many decades, there is an almost communal sense of ownership among New Yorkers. However, the things that might, in the collective consciousness, seem integral to the hotel’s history and heritage are often not part of the building’s original features. “There’s an odd thing about the history of the building,” Miller explains. “Like any

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hotel, they typically remodelled it on a seven to 10-year schedule, which means that virtually every space in the hotel has been modified time and time again over the 85 years that the hotel was in existence.

“What that ends up meaning is a lot of the spaces that people might recognise as being historic might only date from the mid-1990s, but are done in period styles. Part of what Skidmore Owings & Merrill did was go back and look at these spaces and understand what was originally there – because in many cases, it was five remodels ago. People will come in and remark on the ceiling of the Park Avenue lobby – but that dates from 2012. It’s lovely, but it’s not actually Art Deco. It’s something new.”



*French designer Jean-Louis Deniot was enlisted to design the interiors of the residences. Courtesy Selina Denman*

French designer Jean-Louis Deniot was enlisted to design the interiors of the residences – and was conscious of not creating “an Art Deco pastiche”. Sales of apartments have commenced and a recently unveiled show apartment in the Park Avenue sales centre offers a taste of what’s to come. An expansive front door comes complete with a service closet where your deliveries will be deposited by your in-house

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concierge, saving you the hassle of lugging those Amazon packages upstairs yourself. Marble floors in the entrance area create a sense of arrival, while the layout of the apartment is in the European style – “where you try to avoid corridors as much as possible and to align the rooms, one after the other, which creates a sense of spaciousness”, Deniot explains.

Herringbone-esque oak wood floors hint at Art Deco styling, but are not overly classical, and the edges of the sinks in the bathroom mimic the shape and gradation of an emerald-cut diamond, to eliminate any sharp edges. “For the Waldorf, I was more inspired by all the constructivists from Holland in the 1930s and 1940s,” Deniot explains. “There are shapes that may be reminiscent of Art Deco, but there is actually nothing Art Deco here. It is trying to create the impression of the Waldorf Astoria, without recreating any specific era.”



*Two-thirds of the apartments will be two bedrooms or smaller. Courtesy Selina Denman*

Residents will also have access to 4,645 square metres of luxury amenities, including a 25-metre pool, overlooked by a gym and flanked by a winter garden and conservatory. There will be male and female spa areas; a “hangout” space for teenagers; a theatre with a stage for private performances; billiards and games rooms; a grand salon for

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events; a library; a gallery space; and private dining areas – but also quiet corners that guests can retreat to.

“There will probably never be another project in New York of this scale, which means that no one else will ever be able to do this level of amenities or services again,” says Miller.

Handover of the residences is due to begin in 2022, to coincide with the opening of the hotel. Notably, two-thirds of the apartments are two bedrooms or smaller, with prices starting at \$1.7 million for a studio and going up to \$18 million for a four-bedroom property. Two distinct pinnacles that sit at the apex of the building’s towers are being converted into four-bedroom penthouses, offering triple-height living rooms, private elevators and 604 square metres of living space, surrounded by terraces on all sides. Formerly home to mechanical equipment, these spaces have never been inhabited before.

The proposition of a “complete new construction within a landmark shell” is likely to appeal to buyers from the Middle East, notes Tubb. “We definitely find a relationship between this kind of heritage product and buyers [from the Middle East],” he explains. “They have stayed here, and they are used to and desire a very high level of service, and we are poised for that. We’ll have the largest service staff of any residential building in New York, with multiple layers of valet parking, doormen, parking attendants and a private residential concierge on-site. This is what that client is used to,” he elaborates.



*This is the first time that people will be able to own a property in the legendary hotel*

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The wellness component of the property will be another major draw for high-net-worth individuals, the senior director of sales predicts, as will the comfort and privacy offered by a newly created porte cochère – something that only about five per cent of residential buildings in Manhattan offer. The fact that all entrances, corridors and elevators are exclusive to the residences, and not shared by the hotel, will also appeal to potential buyers.

Miller ends with one last anecdote about the property. When the Waldorf Astoria opened in 1931, in the midst of a flailing economy, it enlisted the help of New York socialite, columnist and author Elsa Maxwell (who proves that the influencer trend is not a new one) to help generate some buzz. “They gave her a free apartment in the towers of the Waldorf, with the understanding that she would then host a series of parties in the hotel’s spaces.

“There are some wonderful photos of some of her parties; all these playful absurdities. They did a barnyard party, and there’s this photo of all these farmyard animals – ducks and sheep, who had little felt boots put on them so they wouldn’t damage the floors – coming up in the elevators. I love this idea that there were always people having extravagant parties here, being fun and glamorous. It speaks to what we want to bring back here.”

<https://www.thenational.ae/lifestyle/luxury/luxury-april-2020-objects-that-inspire-and-distract-1.1003799>