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## The Come-Hither Lobby

By MICHAEL M. GRYNBAUM  
Published: January 2, 2009

ENTER the lobby of the Platinum — a sparkling glass-and-steel popsicle of a condominium that rises 43 stories above the circus lights of Eighth Avenue — and you may think you've stumbled into the lair of James Bond's latest big-screen foe.

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Robert Caplin for The New York Times

**IMPRESSIONS** Among New York's statement-making lobbies are that of The Platinum's, with a 26-foot-long fireplace and a moat.

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Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

The Atelier's lobby has a gallery with works by Milton Glaser on view.

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Some lobbies, once meant to capture the feel of a gallery, have become active commercial spaces where art is bought and sold. Other buildings try for a twist on familiar themes like Zen gardens, waterfalls and the traditional fireplace.

But the lobby is also a space that greets residents each morning and welcomes them home at a tough day's end. It is a first impression for guests and a tantalizing glimpse for passers-by. Not quite public, but not quite private either, the lobby occupies a liminal state in one's home life, and with that ambiguity comes a set of priorities that can shift and, oftentimes, conflict.

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Twenty-six feet of roaring flames run along one wall, a deconstructed fireplace whose orange embers dance behind a blue-hued sheet of glass. Enormous plasma television screens stare down from stark white walls. Geometric furniture sits surrounded by a bubbling moat that circumnavigates the space.

The Web site for the building, where one-bedrooms start at \$920,000, describes this scene as "a rarefied world etched in water and fire, stone and glass ... and power." A woman leaving the lobby on a recent evening offered a less charitable opinion: she called it "a den of hell." (The woman, who had been visiting a friend, declined to give her name for fear of offending the hostess.)

In an increasingly tough market that has left some high-rises sitting half-empty, the lobby has become a site of innovation for developers who find it more urgent than ever to make their buildings stand out from the crowd.

Forget the still life over the sofa: ho-hum accouterments have given way to ambitious design schemes that are equal parts amenity and advertisement. Owners are using their ground-floor spaces as an important marketing tool that can entice buyers with the promise of a certain lifestyle.



Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times  
The Atelier's gallery-lobby is visible from the street.

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Tina Fineberg for The New York Times  
Three paintings by Dale Chihuly hang in the lobby of Tribeca Park.

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Tina Fineberg for The New York Times  
**PUT UP YOUR FEET AND STAY AWHILE** The lobby of the Caledonia has a library furnished with books from Assouline.

good. Depends on the lobby.”

At Tribeca Park, Mr. Chihuly’s works hang behind a simple arrangement of sofa and chairs, a traditional approach in keeping with the conservative aesthetic of Mr. Stern, whose postmodern architecture often celebrates styles of the past. Vaguely figurative, the works feature pink, red, and teal swirls against brightly colored backgrounds, a polychromatic contrast to the polished brown wall behind.

The paintings are intended to “celebrate going in and out of the lobby, to add to the experience, to make it more experiential,” said David J. Wine, the vice chairman of the

“There’s a desire to make a statement about the particular personality and status of the building,” said Mayer Rus, a longtime observer of the [Manhattan](#) design scene and a former design editor of House & Garden magazine. “But you also have the desire to appease as many of the tenants as you can.”

Developers, he added, “are not going to roll the dice that someone is going to be turned off from buying in the building.”

Mr. Rus noted that this can be a tricky path to tread. “There needs to be some sort of attempt at consensus,” he said. “Of course, consensus is the quickest road to mediocrity.”

Art arrives in lobbies via a variety of channels, from the personal collections of building owners to commercial arrangements between galleries and developers. The decision can be personal: architects who turn to friends for inspiration. Or it can be made by committee, as a team of in-house designers sifting through catalogs and gallery books.

With so many factors at play, judging the success of a building’s lobby art is a subjective game. Developers and sales agents, predictably, are often agog; according to its owners, to enter the Platinum is to “realize that you have arrived at a cutting-edge building that is unlike any other you have seen before.”

Hard facts like occupancy rates and closing prices (at the moment, 63 percent of the apartments at the Platinum have closed) do not necessarily speak to the lobby. Residents can be indifferent, and many artists are unaware their work is being displayed at all.

“This is the first time I’ve heard of it,” Dale Chihuly said when informed that three of his paintings were hanging in the lobby of Tribeca Park, a rental building designed by [Robert A. M. Stern](#) at the far west end of Chambers Street. Studios there start at \$3,000 a month.

Mr. Chihuly said he had no idea which of his works were on display. “They usually look pretty good when they’re in a lobby,” he said, then paused. “Or hopefully they look

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Related Companies, which developed the building. "Art is something we all live with and love to live with."

It is also something to buy: each work is accompanied by a small silver placard that offers the telephone number for Millenia Fine Art Partners, which sells Mr. Chihuly's work and arranged the showcase at Tribeca Park.

"It's a win-win situation," said Josh Garrick, a spokesman for Millenia. "Not only does a developer end up with great art, but it also introduces potential buyers to the art."

Referring to another residence where Millenia features its wares, he said, "Let's face it: if you live in the [Time Warner](#) Center, you can afford a pretty decent price point of fine art."

The Atelier, a soaring glass high-rise that stands on a windswept stretch of 42nd Street near 12th Avenue, takes this concept even further: its expansive lobby is used as actual gallery space, with a rotating exhibition calendar that features three to four shows a year.

"Why commit to one artist?" asked Elad Dror, a director at the Moinian Group, which developed the building. "You commission a new artist and the lobby looks refreshed every time. You have beautiful art. It's an amenity."

The lobby's white walls and double-height ceiling give it the look of a gallery, complemented by the European house music pumped in through the speaker system. "We're trying to give it the feeling of a boutique luxury hip hotel," Mr. Dror said of the building, where one-bedrooms start at \$770,000.

Currently on display is a collection of colorful prints by the graphic designer Milton Glaser, best known for creating the ubiquitous I Love New York logo in the 1970s. (Over the holidays, Mr. Glaser's show shared the space with an imposing metal menorah.)

The works are explicitly for sale: Mr. Glaser's series of 17-by-22-inch caricatures of cultural icons like [George Harrison](#) and Toulouse Lautrec go for \$350 apiece, a price noted on an accompanying placard. A mischievous-looking Shakespeare, 36 by 48 inches, framed, is \$3,300. At least five works have sold so far; previous shows took in as much as \$40,000 in sales.

This is the first time that Mr. Glaser has displayed his work in an apartment building's lobby. "The works seem to fit in the spaces O.K.," he said. "It's not exactly what one would call a site-specific exhibition. It takes a very nice available space and generous proportions and puts in a bunch of stuff so it looks good."

He said the lobby "looks like a kind of gallery, if one can imagine a very fancy southern French gallery catering to rich people."

Alexander Alberro, an associate professor of art history at Barnard who has studied the commoditization of contemporary art, said the concept of a lobby used for sales was "rather vulgar."

"Even in galleries, the price is kept somewhat discreet," he said in an interview. "To turn the lobby into a site of commerce and expect that people aren't going to really be bothered by that really does imply a certain type of dweller: somebody for whom a life of being perpetually sold to at all times is not a problem."

Residents of the Atelier did not appear to take much note of Mr. Glaser's works on a recent evening, and some seemed indifferent. "Some of the exhibits I like better than others," said Danny Newman, a 24-year-old teacher who bought an apartment there last summer. He said he liked the lobby — "the bright white is very relaxing" — but it was the

building's 47th-floor outdoor garden, with its views of the Hudson River, that sealed the deal.

One building that is not putting its art up for sale is the Caledonia, on West 17th Street at 11th Avenue by the [High Line](#). The sound of a burbling stream greets visitors as they enter the blocklong lobby, where a stone waterfall and bamboo trees compete for attention with more than two dozen objets d'art.

The installations range from brooding Rothko-like abstract canvases by the dimly lighted elevator banks to a hanging garden of orange light bulbs, an ersatz [Dan Flavin](#) ceiling fixture. Stalagmitelike sculptures stand by gray metallic grates on a wall, suggesting a trio of wind turbines.

"We didn't want to be too slick," said Mr. Wine of Related, also a developer of the Caledonia. "That's not what we were after. We were trying to create an oasis within a very cool, happening neighborhood."

Mr. Wine said the lobby's more industrial elements nodded to the commercial past of the area. "It's a celebration of a historic neighborhood in [New York City](#)," he said.

Professor Alberro saw the lobby as more of a link to the present.

"The Caledonia is contributing to the local industry of galleries by lubricating the dwellers' desire to acquire art objects," he said. "One could say they're contributing to the neighborhood in a way that's rather odd."

The professor, who examined photographs of the building from its Web site, reflected a moment. "Well, not odd — it makes total sense! It's a little bit crass, perhaps."

For the most part, residents said they were happy with the space, which they considered unique to Manhattan buildings. "I love it. It's very polished," said Clay Erwin, a 32-year-old banker who bought in July. "You can feel it immediately when you walk in the building. It's something different."

Still, they said it had not been a deciding factor in their decision to live in the building, where the average one-bedroom rents for \$4,800 a month and studios start at \$600,000. And some features struck them as superlative, like a library-cum-lounge complete with African sculpture, high-end design books, and a window emblazoned with famous quotations ("The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible" — [Oscar Wilde](#)). The room, described by Mr. Wine as "a sanctuary in the building," was mostly empty on a recent evening. Its fireplace, residents said, is never lighted.

"The library is cool, but I've never used it, ever," said one renter, a 29-year-old Web developer who asked not to be identified for fear of offending her landlord. "The whole waterfall and river, I don't think it's necessary."

One complaint came from Terence Main, who was irked to find his sculpture, "Urban Guerrillas," a pair of blocky human figures bowing on all fours, displayed in front of a heater vent.

"There are little subtle tweaks that could have really made the installation better," said Mr. Main, who was not consulted about the placement of his work. "There were other places inside the lobby where they could have been placed. I don't know what the logic of that was."

The apartment lobby is a new exhibition space for Mr. Main, who said he would consider adjusting his contract next time. "I used to think other people had a better sense, but I

now realize they don't."

In the end, the vast variety of artwork found in the city's lobbies belies a unifying trait: inoffensiveness. "It's fairly banal art that's not going to bother anybody," Professor Alberro said. "One can't have anything that would have any element of critique, or anything that would push anyone to really actually focus on the object."

Mr. Rus, the design editor, was of the same opinion: "They don't want trouble."

Pepe Karmel, the chairman of the art history department at [New York University](#), does not necessarily consider this a bad thing.

"The ideal Manhattan lobby dates from 1927 or 1928," he wrote in an e-mail message. "Between its marble floors and its elegant moldings, it is decorated with Chippendale furniture and English hunting prints."

The outré designs of the Platinum and Caledonia "seem shockingly un-homelike" in comparison, he wrote, "but they function symbolically in very much the same way."

Professor Karmel, who looked at online photographs of the buildings, compared the Caledonia to "the nature preserves of Costa Rica" and said the fireplace of the Platinum "may induce the illusion that you are camping on an Icelandic glacier."

Either way, he wrote, the lobbies offer a contemporary take on the 1920s "fantasy of life in an English country house, far from the pressures of urban existences."

"What's missing is the fantasy of social exclusivity," Professor Karmel wrote. "Sitting in them, you don't feel like a member of the English gentry. That seems to me an improvement."

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