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The High End A Rental Building With a Hip Hotel Bar Vibe

By TIM McKEOUGH

A few years ago, Eric Birnbaum, a partner at Imperial Companies, was enjoying a drink at the buzzing lobby bar of the Bowery Hotel when he was struck by a question: Why couldn't the lobby of a residential building have just as much energy as a happening boutique hotel?

"In the residential space," Mr. Birnbaum said, "there's been a real lack of creativity and ingenuity. It's very staid and institutional, very cookie cutter. We said, 'Let's create a liveliness and a place that you really want to be in our common areas.' The key to that is good food and beverage, good music and high design."

Henry Hall, the Imperial Companies' new 225-unit rental building at 515 West 38th Street, is Mr. Birnbaum's attempt to deliver just such a hot spot — a building that will blend the public and private in a lobby that is essentially a full-service lounge open to anyone, rather than a glorified hallway for building residents only.

To realize his vision, he tapped Ken Fulk, an interior designer with a flair for glamour and whimsy; Delicious Hospitality Group, the company behind the Manhattan restaurants Charlie Bird and Pasquale Jones; and BKS Architects.

"A lot of buildings try so desperately to be perfectly tasteful that they feel a bit antiseptic," said Mr. Fulk, who designed Henry Hall's common areas, apartments and identity. The double-height lobby he conceived "feels more like your cool friend's grand living room than the lobby to another rental building in Manhattan," he said.

The space features a floor made with three different types of marble set in a herringbone pattern; a 10-foot-diameter custom brass chandelier with 24 cut crystal globes from the 1930s that Mr. Fulk found in Brimfield, Mass.; hand-scraped teak wall paneling with brass accents; a salon-style installation of old oil paintings and framed photography; tribal rugs; and vintage furniture.

To one side, oversize doors will provide access to a restaurant; to the other, an open staircase will climb up to "a super sexy bar," said Mr. Fulk, with Kuba-cloth-covered walls and a counter inspired by antique lux-



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ury trunks. The entire space will be served by Delicious Hospitality Group, which is expected to open its restaurant in September.

The clublike feel extends through the rest of the building as well, as music from the bar will play in the elevators. On the lower level, amenity spaces include a gym and a music room equipped with drums, guitar amplifiers and recording equipment.

On the outside, the 33-story building is designed to avoid looking shiny and new.

"It's north of Hudson Yards, but still in that satellite of new development that tends to be all glass," said Julie Nelson, a partner at BKS Architects. "Eric really wanted something that thought about the history of the neighborhood before that development — a little more of the grittiness."

To achieve an aged look, the architects used so-called clinker brick, which has an intentionally ragged, irregular appearance, for most of the tower. The first three floors, however, are enclosed mostly by glass and

Above, the lobby of Henry Hall at 515 West 38th Street in Manhattan, built to blend public and private spaces and designed to promote a lively vibe. Above right, a bookshelf and a reflection of the staircase in the double height lobby. Right, the exterior of Henry Hall (center, tall building).



Henry Hall
515 West 38th
Street

towering metal piers.

"It's like the building is lifting its skirt," said Ms. Nelson. "We wanted a sense of transparency so the vibrant life going on would be projected out to the street."

Leasing of the apartments began last month. The majority of the market-rate units are studios and one-bedrooms, starting at \$3,200 and \$4,200 per month. There are 25 two-bedrooms, starting at \$6,400 per month. Twenty percent of the units are affordable housing.

Materials and finishes in the apartments include pale oak floors, hand-scraped oak cabinetry, marble countertops and unlacquered brass plumbing fixtures from Waterworks that are intended to develop a patina with age.

"Our best guess," Mr. Birnbaum said, "is that it's going to be 23- to 30-year-olds who are going to be living here. But we've actually had some 55- to 60-year-olds who are like, 'I want to live here.'"