

May 24, 2018
NYTimes.com

The New York Times

A Prewar Building's History Becomes an Amenity

By Tim McKeough
Impressions 29,886,442



The Emigrant Industrial Savings Bank building at 49 Chambers Street was built in 1912 and is being converted to a 99-unit condominium with prices starting at \$1.65 million.

Credit Katherine Marks for The New York Times

Rosario Candela, Emery Roth, Ralph Walker — apartments in buildings designed by these and other giants of early 20th-century architecture have long come with built-in cachet. But beyond a recognizable name, what history lurks beneath?

Developers of some condominium conversions are now enlisting architectural historians to help dig up the past and put their buildings, and the lives of the architects who created them, in context — so the history can be shared with potential buyers.

At 49 Chambers Street, a 99-unit condominium with prices starting at \$1.65 million, the Chetrit Group commissioned Thomas Mellins, a writer, curator and co-author of three books on New York's architectural history with Robert A.M. Stern and others, to plunge into the building's history.

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The enormous banking hall, which was lavishly detailed in limestone, marble and bronze, will be leased to a commercial tenant. Credit Travis Mark

Originally built for the Emigrant Industrial Savings Bank in 1912, the 14-story Beaux-Arts building was designed by Raymond F. Almirall, a promising New York architect who had trained at the prestigious *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, but whose career didn't reach quite the same heights as his contemporaries.

One of Mr. Almirall's most important commissions was the Central Library of the Brooklyn Public Library, but his design was only partially built.

"His Beaux-Arts design starts to be realized and then it gets interrupted around the time of the First World War," Mr. Mellins said. "When it is completed considerably later, his facades are completely stripped off and it becomes a modernist building," designed by Githens & Keally.



The bank hall has barred teller windows and marble counters. Credit Katherine Marks for The New York Times

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Nevertheless, Mr. Almirall's design for 49 Chambers Street is important, Mr. Mellins said, because of its H-shaped footprint, which was designed to bring light and air deep into the building, and its enormous banking hall, which is lavishly detailed in limestone, marble and bronze to project power and security.

Mr. Mellins has written an essay about the building's architecture and given presentations on its history to brokers and potential buyers.

At 12 East 88th Street, where a 13-story rental apartment building completed by Mr. Candela in 1931 is being converted to 39 condos with prices starting at \$1.395 million, Simon Baron Development commissioned the writer and editor Michael Gross to unearth the building's history.



The Woolworth Building, designed by architect Cass Gilbert and completed in 1913, was the tallest building in the world until 1930. Credit Stewart & Company

Mr. Gross, the author of real estate-focused books including "740 Park" and "House of Outrageous Fortune," about 15 Central Park West, produced an essay detailing the building's design and past residents. Early residents, he discovered, included Philip H. Philbin, Jr., a stockbroker and big-game hunter who was arrested for manipulating the stock of Atlas Tack Corporation (and who apparently could not recall what he had done with more than \$400,000 when questioned by the attorney general's office). Mr. Gross has also hosted presentations and book signings with brokers and buyers.

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“It was one of the quieter Candela buildings that was not on everyone’s radar,” said Matthew Baron, the president of Simon Baron, which is also a sponsor of “Elegance in the Sky: The Architecture of Rosario Candela,” an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York running through October 28. “It was important for us to bring awareness to the fact that the building had this rich history.”

According to Mr. Gross, “There are very few buildings in the city that could support a book, but there are dozens and dozens of buildings that can support an essay.”



The Woolworth Building’s main lobby has barrel-vaulted ceilings, Byzantine mosaics, and corbel sculptures. Credit David W. Dunlap/The New York Times

In some cases, developers are lucky enough to work in buildings that already have celebrated histories. At the Woolworth Building, the 1913 skyscraper designed by architect Cass Gilbert, which was the tallest in the world until 1930, Alchemy Properties is in the process of converting the top 30 floors into 33 condos priced from \$3.875 million.

Kenneth S. Horn, the president of Alchemy Properties, said he estimates about half of potential buyers are interested in the history of the building.

“We had this great sense of responsibility,” he said, noting this his company completed a \$22 million restoration of the facade, reclaimed and restored ceramic tiles

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from Frank W. Woolworth's office for use in the new residential lobby; and constructed a pool based on Mr. Gilbert's original design.



Alchemy Properties is in the process of converting the top 30 floors of the Woolworth Building into 33 condos. Credit Rendering by Optimist Consulting

That effort sits well with Helen Post Curry, Mr. Gilbert's great-granddaughter and the owner of a company that runs daily lobby tours in the building.

"I actually think Cass Gilbert would be very pleased," said Ms. Curry. Although her company is not associated with the condo project, Ms. Curry said that she and her staff were among the first people to see the model apartments.

"When guests come through on the tours, they always ask about the condos," she said.

However, after showing a reporter the main lobby's barrel-vaulted ceilings, Byzantine mosaics, and corbel sculptures depicting Mr. Woolworth and Mr. Gilbert, Ms. Curry was quick to add that the condo will have a separate, newly constructed entrance.

"The owners of the condominiums won't be coming through this lobby when they come home," she said. "But they can come on a tour."

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