

Prime property

The Waldorf Astoria – the monster of Manhattan

A \$1bn refit is transforming the mythic hotel into uber-luxury residences

Edwin Heathcote JULY 17 2020

The Waldorf Astoria was once the tallest, largest and grandest place to live in the world, but it is a building with a double identity and a strange history.

It has two copper crowns; an Art Deco castle with twin towers. It is a dense mass of urbanity positioned above thin air, situated not on the bedrock of Manhattan but above the tracks of the railway line that runs beneath.

It is a hotel, but it has always offered apartments for rent, in which some of New York's most famous figures lived out their lives.

It is a skyscraper but it is too fat to be a tower. With 1,400 rooms, it is too big to be truly luxurious, and too familiar to be exclusive. It is open to everyone but not, of course, to *everyone*.

“All the luxuries of private home . . .” wrote the poet Langston Hughes on its opening in 1931. “Now, won't that be charming when the last flop-house has turned you down this winter?”

This year, the 47-storey Park Avenue building is about to undergo another radical split, between hotel and real estate. As Hughes wrote: “Wouldn't a duplex high above the street be grand, with a view of the richest city in the world at your nose?”



Waldorf Astoria under construction, 1930



The Park Avenue entrance

When its [\\$1bn refurbishment](#) is complete, there will be fewer but more spacious rooms: 375 residences, mostly in the towers and with their own entrance, and a further 375 hotel rooms. The Towers of the Waldorf Astoria will encompass apartments ranging from studios (starting from \$1.7m) to four-bedroom properties, penthouses to “marquee residences” with expansive terraces.

The branded residences are the first to have been available to buy in the hotel. It is an ambitious project: \$2.6bn worth of apartments will be entering a post-pandemic New York property market that was already under pressure.

Converting parts of the Waldorf Astoria into condos was a gamble before Covid-19, as Manhattan is awash with unsold luxury apartments. According to one real estate consultant, there are more than 8,500 unsold newly built units in Manhattan. Now it will be even more of a challenge.

But, as befits the first hotel to offer room service, all residents will have access to the services of the hotel (“at an ultra-luxury level”), mediated through “concierge closets”, spaces between the staff corridors and apartments accessible to both staff and residents for the exchange of dry cleaning, parcels and empty champagne bottles. Now, they are being marketed as the perfect tools for social distancing and self-isolation.



if await guests in Peacock Alley, the corridor connecting the Waldorf and the Astoria hotels, also a posh shopping 910s © Getty Images



Society ladies take their daily mahjong lesson at the Waldorf Astoria, c1920s © Bettmann Archive

Family feuds and fraudsters

In 2014 the Waldorf Astoria was sold for almost \$2bn to Anbang, the globally ambitious but troubled Chinese insurance company, making it the most expensive hotel ever. In 2017, Anbang founder Wu Xiaohui was detained by the Chinese government as part of Xi Jinping's crackdown on corruption. He was convicted of fraud and embezzlement and is now in a Chinese jail.

The insurer was [rebranded as Dajia](#). It is not surprising that Donald Trump was the first US president not to stay here (traditionally, the hotel has hosted visiting US presidents from Hoover to Obama).

If the hotel's ownership appears troubled, its genesis, too, is a fantastic story of family feuds, inherited wealth, branding, architecture, real estate and financial and cultural leverage.



Guests John and Jacqueline Kennedy at cocktail hour, 1956 © The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images

Its history begins with a mansion on 33rd Street and Fifth Avenue. John Jacob Astor III's house became a nexus for New York society and on his death in 1890, the site was passed to his son William Waldorf Astor (who later in England became a peer and bought Cliveden and Hever Castle) and William's cousin John Jacob ("Jack") Astor IV, who would die on the Titanic in 1912.

William began work on building the 13-storey Waldorf Hotel on his part of the site. Jack followed by building the 16-storey Astoria hard up against it on his part. The cousins' relationship was fraught, but they managed to co-operate in business. William persuaded Jack to sell his half of the site.

The twin hotels became a ballroom for the city. In his brilliant analysis of the nature of New York architecture, *Delirious New York* (1978), the architect Rem Koolhaas wrote: "Waldorf pulls society from its hiding places to what becomes in effect a colossal collective salon for exhibiting and introducing new urban manners (such as women alone — yet clearly respectable — smoking in public)."



A ball at the hotel in 1934 © ullstein bild via Getty Images

The schism between the hotels was embodied in Peacock Alley, a glass-roofed arcade of shops that ran between them (or so legend has it) and became Manhattan's poshest parade, a place where women could safely stroll and not get their skirts muddy.

By the late 1920s, Manhattan's social centre had moved north. The old hotels looked underscaled and dated and a new site was acquired further up Park Avenue to catch wealthy passengers arriving at Grand Central Station. The old hotels were sold to developers in 1929 and became the site of the Empire State Building, just in time to miss the Wall Street crash.

Spaces for the exchange of laundry and champagne are marketed as the perfect tools for social distancing

The new hotel was to be a monster, as big as the Empire State but squashed into a larger, fatter building, an entire block between 49th and 50th Streets. Designed by architects Schultze & Weaver, it opened in 1931 — a Manhattan mountain, its walls cliffs of granite and limestone, its interior a metropolis in miniature.

A contemporary section through the building reveals its density and complexity, from the kitchens and bakery in the basement between the train lines to the elevated lobby, the array of club rooms, ballrooms, restaurants, bars, radio studios, shops and suites; the Manhattan dream of the vertical city.

"It's a magnificent building," architect Robert AM Stern tells me, "one of the best of the 1930s and often under-appreciated. The massing makes it appear like two buildings, everything is perfectly scaled to everything else and the details are beautiful. It represents a great moment in New York culture and architecture."



Financier Winthrop Aldrich (left) with Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller at the April in Paris Ball, 1957 © The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images

Everything seems to have happened there, from the launch of the LP record in 1948 to IBM's personal computer in 1981. Long-term residents who rented suites for astonishing sums included Cole Porter (whose piano is still in the hotel), mobster Bugsy Siegel, Marilyn Monroe and Frank Sinatra (he rented Porter's old suite in 1964 for \$1m a year).

It became the New York base of every US president until the current hotelier incumbent. But as that Langston Hughes poem, *Advertisement for the Waldorf Astoria*, published shortly after the 1931 opening, suggests, it was not for everyone.

*"Have luncheon there this afternoon, all you jobless.
Why not? Dine with some of the men and women who got rich off of your labour,
Who clip coupons with clean white fingers because your hands dug coal, drilled stone, sewed
garments, poured steel
To let other people draw dividends and live easy."*

Lawrence Jackson, professor of English and history at Johns Hopkins, says: "Hughes introduces the complete panorama of black labour in the creation of opulence. Digging the foundations, the grunt work. The hotel was a part of the exploitation of black labour."

Like all such institutions at that time, the hotel was segregated, which has been deftly excised from its histories. Black people could work and perform there, but they could not stay as guests. Even in 1943 the hotel had to break its own policies to accommodate the president of Liberia.

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There are other subterranean histories. One is the semi-mythical Track 61, a leftover from the site's history as a power plant for Grand Central. Right underneath the current hotel is a railway track with a platform, once used to transport coal and which was upgraded and occasionally used for access to the building, including surreptitiously by President Roosevelt in an effort to conceal his disability. His entire armour-plated car would be loaded on to the train and taken up via a private elevator.

The rail spur has made countless pop culture appearances, from a party thrown by Andy Warhol in 1965 to an escape route in the 2009 remake of *The Taking of Pelham 123*. The platform can just be glimpsed from the windows of the Metro North trains leaving the station.

The hotel is a film star in its own right, appearing first in *Week-end at the Waldorf* (1945), and later in *Coming to America*, *Scent of a Woman*, *Serendipity* and dozens more.

Touching the moonlight



A model residence in the sales gallery; studio apartments start at \$1.7m

Interior designer Pierre-Yves Rochon will be reinterpreting the Deco interiors (he redesigned London's smaller but similarly lavish Art Deco Savoy Hotel), while architects SOM have the job of rejigging one of Manhattan's most complex buildings.

The Starlight Pool, with the sky visible via a retractable roof, will comprise a winter garden, private dining room, library, workspaces and residents' own dedicated theatre.

One Waldorf regular over the years was Phyllis Lambert, architect, client for the nearby Seagram Building by Mies van der Rohe and founder of the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal.

"I loved the discretion and small lobby of the Waldorf Towers and its location near the Seagram Building so I rented a small suite every time I came to New York over 40 years," she told me.

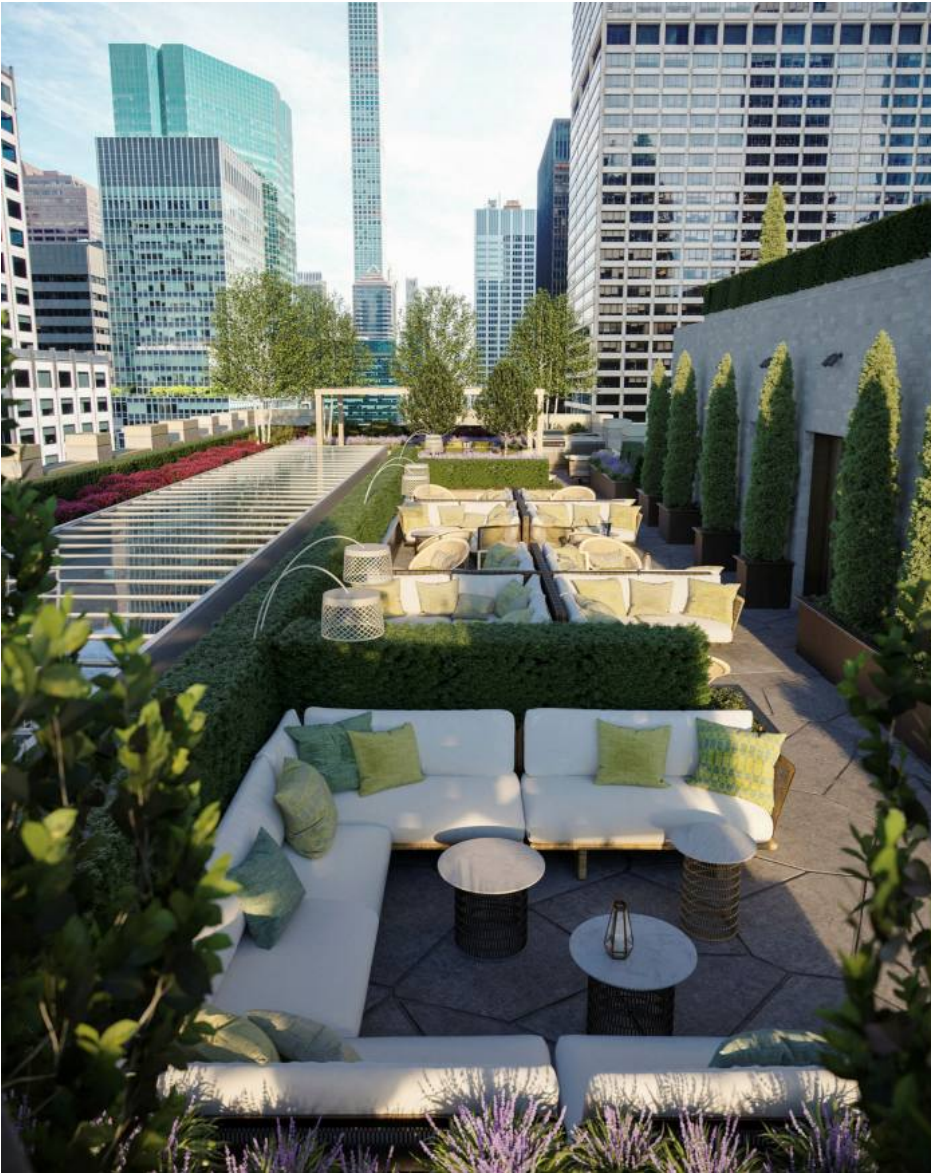
"These suites were not my style but of first-class quality which is impossible to find now in NY. I knew the St Regis and the Plaza well but none compared to the intimacy, comfort and discretion. The staff hardly ever changed."



The new Starlight Pool reveals the sky via a retractable roof and will include a winter garden and theatre for residents

She adds a note of caution about its development. “I fear that it [might] get ruined and glitzed as did the Ritz in Paris and London a few decades ago.”

When I was shown around, a couple of months before lockdown began, there was not much to see except a screening room, a slick video concentrating on the history and the restored “Spirit of Achievement”, the slender Deco figure that adorned the hotel’s canopy, sculpted by Icelandic artist Nina Sæmundsson in 1931.



Some of the apartments have expansive roof terraces

It felt a little underwhelming, a little too carefully under wraps. Is this the right time to be launching a super-lux property in Midtown Manhattan? Certainly the central section of the city is seeing a return of residential, as is Downtown, while the Upper East Side languishes a bit. And the brand is unassailable. The poet Wallace Stevens wrote: “You touch the hotel the way you touch moonlight” in *Arrival at the Waldorf*.

It sounds romantic but, of course, you cannot touch moonlight. In fact, you can barely see anything. Boarded up and forlorn, the building is a dull cliff of stained grey limestone. But the idea of the Waldorf Astoria is indelible. It is a myth as much as it is a building and institution. And a myth makes priceless marketing.

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