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The newly restored lobby of the Hotel @ the Lafayette with its dramatic red-painted plaster ceiling, which was discovered inadvertently when the chandelier was removed for cleaning.

Derek Gee / Buffalo News

Lafayette's restoration a triumph

Months of painstaking, detailed work revives historic hotel into a must-see

By Mark Sommer

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Layer upon layer of paint, including pink neon, had to be scraped off to uncover mahogany wainscoting.

It took days of cleaning with Q-tips to reveal the pastoral scene in a blackened, late 19th century oil painting.

In the Crystal Ballroom, workers laid 50,000 tiles imported from Turkey to replicate the original floor. A coat of white paint was removed from six crystal chandeliers to make visible the brass base containing the hotel's moniker.

"Guys were in here for weeks and weeks, on their hands and knees, putting them in one at a time. They were ready to kill me," said Rocco Termini, the developer and a part owner.

It's been a slow, painstaking and — to hear early reviews — triumphant return for the new Hotel @ the Lafayette, a downtown landmark left for dead before being rescued by Termini and guided by Carmina Wood Morris, an architectural and engineering firm.

"This is an extraordinary restoration and renovation of a building that was on the brink," architectural historian Martin Wachadlo said. "It's one of Buffalo's great architectural treasures that has finally been rediscovered after languishing unknown and unappreciated for years."

The Hotel @ the Lafayette, with its melding of French Renaissance and later Arte Moderne styles, formally opens its doors May 29.

Much still remains to be done. On a recent day, a worker in the Pan American Brewery and Dining Room chipped away at the concrete floor, slowly exposing the more-than-a-century-old red herringbone quarry tile underneath.

But even as the work continues, events are being rolled out, including the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society's 150th anniversary gala Thursday. Dozens of weddings are among some 200 events already scheduled, Termini said. Among the couples choosing the downtown landmark are James Schaller and Meghan Finamore of the Town of Tonawanda, who plan to tie the knot at the Lafayette in June 2013.

"We've been wanting something historic, and when we went into the Crystal Ballroom, I fell in love with it," Finamore said. "Every time I look at pictures, I fall in love with it again. It is absolutely beautiful."

"It is an amazing piece of history back in Buffalo," her fiance added.

The seven-story, brick and white terra-cotta building includes a 34-room boutique hotel, with each room containing a different wall-sized image from the 1901 Pan-American Exposition held in Buffalo. There are 115 apartments, of which 95 already have been rented, Termini said.

The space also will house seven retail operations, with restaurants and full-service wedding planning, including a bakery, florist, wedding gown designer and bridal registry.

Termini plans to add "historic-themed lighting around the building, and enhance the landscaping in Lafayette Square to serve as a backdrop for wedding pictures.

The \$42 million project, made possible with historic tax credits, is already a "huge success" even before the building officially opens its doors, Termini said.

"People are coming here from the suburbs that haven't been downtown in five years, and they're amazed. They say no one will come downtown, but if you give them a great product, people are going to come. That's exactly what's happened here," he said.

The cost to restore the building was not for the faint of heart. It cost \$3 million to remove the asbestos. Plaster work to repair water-damaged ceilings on the first floor added up to \$2.5 million.

Restoring more than 100 stained- and leaded-glass windows was another \$200,000.

The floor with the Turkish tiles? \$75,000. Restoring those chandeliers? \$30,000.

It required considerable detective work to determine how the building looked back in 1904, when it was designed by Buffalo's Louise Blanchard Bethune, the country's first professional female architect, and through later changes.

The hotel doubled in size in 1912, the Grand Ballroom was added in 1917 and the tap room in 1926. An overhaul was done in the 1940s in the style of Arte Moderne.

Determining the building's look and design through those phases was a challenge for architects Jonathan H. Morris and Paul Lang, and the firm's interior designers, Lee Fustino and Pamela Timby.

However, the Carmina Wood Morris firm's experience in historic preservation helped, since it had been involved in renovation of the Corn Exchange Building, the Calumet building, Remington Lofts in North Tonawanda and the Webb Lofts, also developed by Termini.

Fustino said clues into the palette of colors were pursued at the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society. Documents, postcards and other historical materials helped.

Sometimes, an original or earlier color or material was inadvertently unmasked.

In the hotel lobby, removing a chandelier for cleaning revealed plaster underneath painted a dramatic red. In the first-floor hallway, lime wash primer concealed intricate plasterwork bursting with golds, umbers, and blacks and reds.

Morris said his three-year involvement with the project was "by far the most challenging and satisfying" of his career.

"I've put in a lot of time. My wife calls this my mistress. She's glad to have me back," he said.

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How nice to read positive things about our city after years of negativity and talk of "decay". The first step for change is to dream. Chippewa, Allentown and Elmwood, as well as the Hertel corridor, are examples of how ordinary Buffalonians have made great contributions to the city as well as some entrepreneurs who had visions. We need to keep up the momentum! Bravo!

JOHN GABNER, NIAGARA FALLS, NY on Mon May 21, 2012 at 03:27 PM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

Pffff. Shoulda sent it to the scrap pile with Trico. Right? I mean, right? Rich Mc? Kevin Mc? Anybody? How 'bout you, Jason Sears? I mean, what a waste of "handouts"! Right, Jim Coffed??!!?! I mean, saving old buildings is such a silly thing to do when you can just raze it and hope something grows up in its place! And that Termini, what a nut-job he is for thinking re-purposing an old building would be a good idea! I bet he goes broke on this one.

LOU BORDONARO, BUFFALO, NY on Wed May 9, 2012 at 10:22 PM

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

WOW! What a beautiful renovation. Stuart Hunt would have been so pleased to see your great accomplishments. I worked for Stuart Hunt for many years and