

# Restoring a Landmark Hotel to Its Gilded Glory

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

Solid-gold cutlery will not grace the dining tables and the tenor in the shower stall next door will not be Caruso, but the landmark Hotel Knickerbocker at Broadway and 42d Street may one day welcome overnight guests again, after eight decades as an office building.

As Times Square history is uprooted around it, the copper-crowned Knickerbocker — a sumptuous architectural confection that never really lost its French Renaissance flair — would emerge as a rare survivor of the theater district's earlier gilded age, the last time a century turned.

Numerous new hotels are being built or planned around Times Square. But none can compete with the Knickerbocker's lineage.

Built by the Astors and adorned by Maxfield Parrish's mural "Old King Cole and His Fiddlers Three," the 15-story Knickerbocker opened in 1906 as a "Fifth Avenue hotel at Broadway prices." Only two blocks from the old Metropolitan Opera House, it was a home away from Naples for Enrico Caruso, who posed on the rooftop for wedding-day pictures with Dorothy Park Benjamin in 1918.

Only three years later, with business falling under Prohibition, the hotel closed and was converted to office use. Today, known as 1466 Broadway, the building's tenants are mostly sportswear manufacturers.

But the S L Green Realty Corporation, which bought the building last year, has different ambitions for the property and is marketing it to hoteliers through Lehman Brothers.

"We think there's tremendous potential for its being a hotel," said Stephen L. Green, chairman of the board and chief executive of S L Green. "That's what it was built for."

"A moderate hotel for tourists at Broadway and 42d Street?" Mr. Green asked rhetorically. "Sounds good to me."

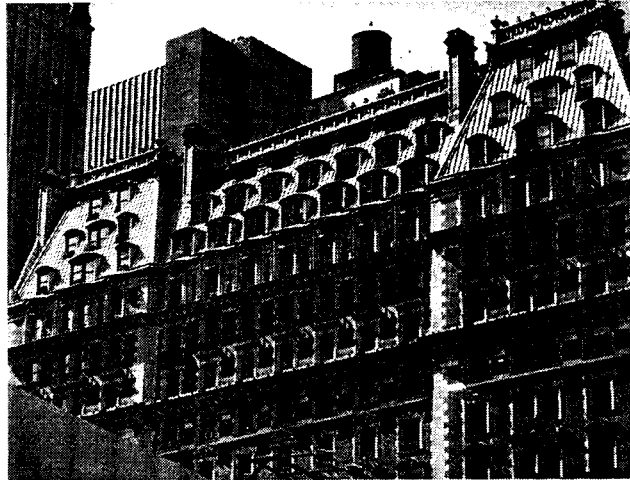
For now, the building's chief function seems to be as a Gap billboard. The facade is cocooned in scaffolding that is covered by protective mesh panels, about 50 feet high, printed with gigantic images of three impassive youths wearing orange and gray Gap vests.

The scaffolding went up in March and will remain for another year or more while inspectors from Bone/Levine Architects "meticulously examine the complicated, landmarked



Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times

The Hotel Knickerbocker in Times Square, now known as 1466 Broadway, may become a hotel again, after being bought by a realty company that would like to convert it. Below, the facade in 1997.



David W. Dunlap/The New York Times

stonework," as a statement from S L Green described the process. Once this is finished, any needed repairs will begin.

"Whenever you put up pipe scaffolding, you have to put up protective mesh," said Christopher Pollack of S L Green. Ordinarily, facade inspection is performed on rigs hoisted from rooftops. But the steep three-

story mansard roof at 1466 Broadway made that impossible, so scaffolding was installed.

The mesh is covered in Gap imagery because the chain's flagship New York store occupies the base of the building, the statement from S L Green said.

In June and July, the Department of Buildings issued notices of viola-

tions for the Gap signs. "It's not so much that you can't have signs," said Ilyse Fink, a spokeswoman for the agency. "It's that they erected them without permits." The scaffolding itself has been authorized.

Benjamin Feldman of S L Green said the company was discussing the violations with city officials "to make sure we clear this up."

Although S L Green believes a hotel is "probably the highest and best use" of 1466 Broadway, Mr. Green said, it would be "happy" to continue operating the building for the garment trade if no buyers were found.

S L Green specializes in buying, upgrading and leasing older "Class B" office buildings. It acquired 1466 Broadway, the Graybar Building at 420 Lexington Avenue and 25 West 43d Street last year from the Helmsley interests for \$165 million.

The Knickerbocker was developed by John Jacob Astor (1864-1912), who also built the St. Regis Hotel at Fifth Avenue and 55th Street and the Astoria Hotel — later joined by a hyphen to his cousin's Waldorf Hotel — on the site of the Empire State Building.

Richly encrusted with terra cotta and limestone pediments, balustrades, keystones and quoins, the Knickerbocker looks like the work of many hands, as it was: the architects Marvin & Davis, Bruce Price and Trowbridge & Livingston and artists like Parrish, Frederic Remington and Frederick MacMonnies.

About 1,000 guests could be lodged there and 2,000 patrons seated in its many dining rooms, which included a private chamber with solid-gold service for 48.

Another novel feature was a corridor lined with settees and heraldic banners that led directly to the Times Square subway station. (To this day, there is a doorway at the east end of the shuttle platform, bearing a masonry plaque reading "Knickerbocker" in letters eight inches tall.)

The hotel was converted to office use in 1921 and known as the Newsweek Building from 1940 to 1959 when the magazine, then owned by Vincent Astor, was the main tenant. The Parrish mural was eventually installed at the St. Regis, as the focal point of the King Cole Room.

With the demand for office space in Times Square almost nonexistent in 1980, Harry B. Helmsley and David Baldwin began converting the building to residential lofts, using city tax incentives. Commercial demand surged as the project neared completion, so they changed course and marketed 1466 Broadway as a showroom center, a kind of northern outpost of the garment district.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission designated it a landmark in 1988 as "one of the very few grand hotels in the Beaux-Arts style surviving in the Times Square area."

Although the facade is now largely obscured, the commission does not regulate scaffolding or scaffold signs, said the chief of staff, Terri Rosen Deutsch, "because they are viewed as temporary installations and they do not damage the building."