

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD



Photo © James Ewing

Stella Tower

Jarvis Studio

New York

By Josephine Minutillo

The building is an Art Deco gem in the middle of New York's gritty Hell's Kitchen neighborhood. Designed by Ralph Walker—heralded in a 1957 New York Times article as the “architect of the century” but long since fallen into obscurity—the 19-story, dramatically setback, and ornately detailed structure was originally built for the New York Telephone Company in 1930. Redubbed Stella Tower, part of it remains an office building for a telecommunications giant— Verizon—but its upper floors are being converted to luxury apartments to take advantage of an unquenchable demand in that sector of Manhattan's red-hot real-estate market.



PEOPLE & PRODUCTS

- **Lighting Fixtures:** USAI (downlights); Boyd (sconces)
- **Stone:** Eurasia
- **Glass:** Bendheim
- **Wallcoverings:** Innovations
- **Paint:** Benjamin Moore

Over the years, much of the lobby's luster was lost behind layers of dark paint, fluorescent strip lighting, and Verizon-installed security booths, still visible in the portion of the ground floor that Verizon retains. For an 800-square-foot lobby sectioned off for residents (apartments will go for as much as \$15 million) a dramatic makeover was needed. "Our goal was to create a space people wanted to be in, not one they wanted to go away from," says designer Jarvis Wong of Jarvis Studio.

Wherever possible, original Art Deco details—elaborate bronze grilles with geometric patterns, intricate floral motifs, terrazzo flooring—were restored and refinished. But key to Wong's overhaul was to make the space lighter, brighter, and more uplifting. The heavy terra-cotta walls, with their crimson color and busy pattern, were "holding the space back from being a luxury experience," Wong recalls. Amanda Garrett agrees. As interior design director for developer JDS Development Group, she is leading the transformation of several of Walker's commercial buildings into high-end residential properties. "It was a somber space," she says. "You definitely felt like you were in a utility building."

The design team replaced the terra-cotta with chevron-set onyx in varying hues of white and brown, topped by sugar-white marble and antiqued bronze metal trims. Overhead, the embossed cornice and central star-shaped design of the nearly 15-foot-high ceiling were maintained, but painted white as part of the overall brightening of the space.

To give the rotunda-like room a focal point, Wong designed a layered round chandelier inspired by Gaetano Sciolari's atomic fixtures of the 1950s, but much bigger: its upper tier is 8 feet in diameter. "The design came together very quickly," recalls Wong, "and was approved after just a first sketch." That sketch was also enough to get the lighting manufacturer, a company in China with whom Wong had previously worked, started on fabricating it. The 400-pound chandelier, assembled in Guangzhou and shipped in four pieces, required additional anchors to be installed in the ceiling before its restoration.

Finished in mirrored bronze, the fixture contains 68 40-watt half-chrome incandescent bulbs, which produce a soft glow that reflects off the room's rich surfaces and smoky mirrors. Surrounding and supplementing it are eight LED recessed downlights. Four of the same downlights illuminate the small elevator lobby, its two cars cut off from the main Verizon bank and its ceiling lowered for a more intimate scale. Gold-trimmed square sconces accent the entry area.

While catering to those in the market for multimillion-dollar apartments with a touch of history, Stella Tower's transformation from drab to deluxe also puts the spotlight on an architect history had forgotten.

Completion Date: October 2014

Designer: Jarvis Studio

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