

# GOTHAM

## Art Deco Elegance at Walker Tower

BY MIKE OLSON



Cass Gilbert has his Woolworth Building, and Daniel Burnham has the Flatiron Building. In New York, the most iconic buildings can be matched to their architects faster than you can say “McKim, Mead & White.” However, every so often one is lost to history—even if he was proclaimed “the architect of the century” in a 1957 article in *The New York Times*. Such is the case with Ralph Walker. But with the conversion of his West 18th Street Telephone Building, the city is reintroduced to one of its visionaries—and 50 families get to call the reimagined **Walker Tower** home.

Back in the 1920s, the New York Telephone Company needed to reassure customers that its newfangled technology was here to stay, and it delivered that message through the permanence of architecture. When it came time to construct a new office and switching station in Chelsea, the company turned to Ralph Walker, the man who, years earlier, built the Barclay-Vesey Building at 140 West Street, considered the first Art Deco skyscraper in the city.

Walker’s colossal creation on 18th Street did its job. In fact, the concrete-encased, heavy-steel-framed structure remained a functioning Verizon building well into the 21st century—and it had the drop ceilings and dreary cubicles to prove it. Thankfully, Michael Stern, managing partner of JDS Development Group, saw past that. “The first time I went into the building I went straight up to the roof,” he remembers, and the unobstructed views in all directions—made possible because construction of the 328-foot building predated neighborhood height limits—made his call an easy one. “I decided to buy the building on the spot.”

Of course, turning a long-neglected office building into the epitome of high-end living wasn’t easy. To do it, Stern’s team started with what was already in place. “Walker’s telephone buildings had to accommodate a lot of vibration,” says Marci Clark, a PhD candidate in art history who helped curate an exhibit on the architect for the opening of Walker Tower. “There was the modern steel frame technology, but he also used masonry to make them solid, like mountains.” (The developer in Stern gets straight to the point: “If you tried to build a structure like that today, you’d go bankrupt.”)

The sheer size and scale of the building allow for the units' most impressive features: ceilings that reach more than 14 feet (with tilt-and-turn windows more than nine feet tall), a lack of interior load-bearing walls (making for a surprisingly open concept), and terraces made from Walker's signature setbacks that let lucky homeowners look down (literally) on Manhattan's most expensive real estate in the West Village and Tribeca.

The building also includes every conceivable modern amenity: heated floors in every room, zoned humidification (good for preserving artwork), and a Crestron home automation system that controls everything from lighting to music with the touch of a tablet. "It's more state-of-the-art than any building in the city," Stern attests, "yet it lives in this iconic, prewar building with an architectural pedigree."

JDS, along with co-developer Property Markets Group, painstakingly restored the building's façade and expanded the building's four top floors. Careful to make sure this new space worked with Walker's original design, the team restored the Art Deco ornament on the lobby entrance—highlighting the same flourishes that greeted phone bill payers at street level nearly 100 years ago. "We didn't introduce any new shapes, and we stayed true to the materials," Stern explains. "In fact, we're the first building to use cast bronze in 70 years."

As a result, an architecture lover like Marci Clark cannot help but appreciate the care that went into every step of the redevelopment. "When you think of an office building, you certainly don't think of sweeping spaces and such volume and light," she says. "Walker believed that space was for human use, and I think he would be proud of how it has been transformed."

As Stern looks back at how far the project has come and looks forward to future sales, the full scope of Walker Tower truly comes into focus. "We appreciate the asset not just because we're the developers, but because we know we might not ever replicate it," he explains. "Where do you find overbuilt prewar towers in great downtown neighborhoods to convert? You just don't. It's once in a career." *212 W. 18th St., 212- 335-1800*