

Uniquely Positioned

An Interview with Bernard Lackner,
General Manager, Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York

EDITORS' NOTE Bernard Lackner began his career at Hamburg's Four Seasons Hotel (*Vier Jahreszeiten*). Following appointments at the Hilton and the Hotel George V in Paris, he emigrated to the United States and attended several management seminars at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration. From there, he joined the management team of Four Seasons Hotels at The Pierre, New York. Soon thereafter, he became Resident Manager of the Maxim in Palm Springs, California, and eventually assumed the same post at the Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York. A year later, he was promoted to his present position.



Bernard Lackner

PROPERTY BRIEF Perfectly situated on Manhattan's elite Upper East Side, the Hôtel Plaza Athénée New York (www.Plaza-athenee.com) is steps from some of the city's most revered attractions, including Central Park, Museum Mile, and Madison Avenue shopping. This 142-room luxury boutique hotel has been the home-away-from-home for sophisticated travelers from around the world for over two decades. The hotel is currently undergoing a major renovation of guestrooms, suites, lobby, and fitness center, as well as the creation of a new spa. Owned by the Imperial Hotels Group of Thailand, it is a member of The Leading Hotels of the World.

You are currently undergoing a major renovation. Did the timing work out well, and what can we expect from the property?

Yes, now is the right time to renovate because we are positioning ourselves for the future. We are also repositioning the hotel to compete with the best properties the city has to offer, especially our new suite product. This renovation shows a tremendous commitment by our ownership for the long term.

Will the renovation be a complete overhaul with an entirely new feel?

We are renovating a total of 75 rooms, including all suites. There will be brand new bathrooms, and a beautiful new room décor with a warm, residential feel. The suites will now have an additional half-bathroom, stall showers, deep soaking tubs, dual sinks, full kitchenettes and hardwood floors. The lobby will be more of a club-like atmosphere with lounge seating and softer lighting.

Many who refer to this property talk about its unique location and its residential feel. Is your competitive set the midtown properties that are more business focused or is it more of the uptown residential group?

Due to the proximity of our hotel to midtown, the midtown hotels are our competitors, but the uptown hotels do provide a more residential feel, as do we. For most hotels, the decision-making process as to where one stays depends on so

many factors: brand name, location, reputation, and standards, to name a few. But we are uniquely positioned on 64th Street where guests benefit from the Upper East Side location and are still within walking distance to midtown.

Will the renovation include an upgrade in technology as well?

Yes, all rooms have wireless Internet access now, and will receive new plasma screen TV's and improved cable systems with many more choices. We're going to have a brand new business center downstairs with several terminals. We're also finally going to have a spa and a brand new gym with state-of-the-art equipment.

Will the spa have an intimate feel to match the nature of the property?

We will have four treatment rooms, and it will have somewhat of a more intimate feel, because for this type of hotel, you do not need more than four treatment rooms. But each treatment room will be a private facility with a relaxation room and a steam room, which not too many spa facilities provide. In addition, we will have one massage room for couples. It will be managed independently by an outside company, and we will announce the brand name behind that in the near future.

Many employees get concerned when they hear about change. Following the renovation, do you expect many of those will stay with you?

Yes, that's the feeling we have. We have a very loyal staff who are all very dedicated, have been here for a long time, and they're all looking forward to a renovated product.

Many say there are hoteliers who enjoy operating a hotel and its day-to-day



activities, while others have a skill set for renovation, construction, and development. Not many enjoy both areas. Is this a challenging process for you, and are you enjoying it?

It has been an invaluable experience to go through the renovation process from A to Z, from conceptualization to finish, on which we still have a couple of months to go. Would I do this for a living long term? I probably would not. But it is part of the program and it's important that someone in my position be involved in the process to see it fully completed.

For a number of years, properties in New York City enjoyed the high rates that accompanied a boom in business. While most feel that the business will come back, they wonder if the rates will return to where they were. What is your opinion of the timing of an economic recovery, and are you optimistic long term for the strength of the New York City hotel market?

New York is a very unique city and has always shown tremendous strength and ability to recover. We probably will not see an immediate recovery; however, we are optimistic about the future.

After overseeing this property for so many years, it must be exciting as you relaunch your new product and new positioning.

We are very excited about it, and we feel confident that once we are finished, the consumer will respond very well to the new look and facilities. We will make every effort through sales and marketing to capitalize on this investment and showcase our new product and renowned service, of which we are very proud. ●

Remodeled guestroom (top); guest bathroom