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A Quirky Building That Has Charmed Its Tenants

By HELENE STAPINSKI

The Flatiron Building's triangular shape, designed by Daniel Burnham, and its location at the junction of Broadway and Fifth Avenue at 23rd Street, have made it a New York landmark. But that grandeur is skin deep: the interior is a warren of awkward spaces that do not easily accommodate modern office furniture or encourage casual collaboration among workers. And the men's and women's bathrooms are on alternating floors.

So when an Italian developer last year bought a majority interest in the Flatiron and raised the idea that the building could be converted to a luxury hotel, it seemed logical that workers in the building would be thrilled at the prospect of moving to a better space.

Not so.

"Everyone will be dragged kicking and screaming from here," said Airie Stuart, publisher of Palgrave, an imprint of Macmillan Publishers.

Ms. Stuart, like many of her 600 or so Macmillan co-workers, has a special allegiance to the 180,000-square-foot Flatiron. Though it is hard to configure office space in a triangle, she said, "the charm makes up for it. It's legend."

Macmillan, which rents the whole building except for the commercial space on the ground floor, has slowly taken over all the office space since its St. Martin's Press imprint moved there in 1969.

Macmillan signed a new lease six years ago, which places the rent about equal to the current recession-market rates. Macmillan is paying about \$30 a square foot; rents in the neighborhood had been over \$40, according to Newmark Knight Frank, the building's managing agent.

Eight and a half years remain on Macmillan's lease. Veronica Mainetti, managing director, USA, for the Sorgente Group, the developer, said on Tuesday that no decision had been made on the building.

Because of its footprint and location, the Flatiron has problems and perks that other buildings do not. The swirling winds generated by its shape are said to have inspired the phrase "23 skidoo" — what police officers would say as they dispersed the men who gathered outside to linger and watch for women's skirts to blow up as they passed.

Those winds blew in Peter Janssen's 21st-floor window at the point of the building a few winters ago. The terra cotta balustrade outside his office had been removed during a renovation, allowing an already strong west wind to become even stronger.

“I came in to find the window on the floor and a 1,200-page manuscript all over the place,” said Mr. Janssen, director for academic and library marketing at Macmillan.

The 21st floor, which was added in 1905, three years after the rest was completed, can be reached only by taking a second elevator from the 20th floor. Though he loves his office, he said it could be a lonely place.

“You don’t get a lot of people walking by,” Mr. Janssen said. He compares it to being in a situation comedy: “Guest stars come by every now and then.”

On the 20th floor, windows are placed much higher up, the bottoms nearly at chest height. “I have an incredible view,” said Charles Bozian, Macmillan’s vice president for finance and administration. “But not unless I stand up.”

The small bathrooms alternate by floor, men on even, women on odd. “And the bathrooms are not very nice, either,” said Alison Lazarus, the president of Macmillan’s sales division. When important guests visit, she has them use the spacious bathroom on the 18th floor, by far the building’s best, offering a view all the way to [New Jersey](#).

Because the building is narrow, it is flooded with light. Most employees have windows — big windows, which is a plus for the most part.

John J. Murphy III, director of publicity for St. Martin’s, remembers when he bought new glasses and then came into work. “I was sitting at my desk, and everyone kept coming in and looking at me oddly,” Mr. Murphy said. He then realized that because of all the light in the building, his tinted lenses never turned clear. “I looked like some Greek shipping magnate or shady drug dealer sitting here at my desk,” he said.

The elevator bank, the waiting area and the stairway eat up an unusual amount of space. “We’ve used every nook and cranny,” said Steve Cohen, executive vice president and chief operating officer for St. Martin’s. “You’re lucky if you get 70 percent of the floor space.”

Mr. Cohen, one of the building’s biggest admirers, has a huge collection of old postcards featuring the building, as do many of his co-workers. He has an old photograph of tourists outside on a sightseeing carriage.

Mr. Cohen also can claim to have experienced the notorious hydraulic elevator malfunction of 1998. The old elevators, which were subsequently replaced, were run with water pressure and were slow and bouncy. “You needed a plumber to fix them, not a mechanic,” said the superintendent, Sunny Atis.

One day, the hydraulic system burst, flooding Mr. Cohen’s elevator car and soaking him. The doors opened on the third floor, and he and the water came rushing out.

The elevators were so slow that one executive claims you could read an entire manuscript while waiting for one and then riding it up. Mr. Murphy lived in a high-rise right across the street from the Flatiron for 15 years. “My commute,” he said, “was a half hour.”

After John Sargent arrived 14 years ago as chief executive, a poll was taken to see if the employees wanted to relocate to a newer building in the neighborhood with an open floor plan. But the overwhelming response was to stay put.

“I never, never wanted to leave,” said Matthew Shear, executive vice president and publisher at St. Martin’s, whose curved windows on the 16th floor at the prow give him a stunning panoramic view of the city and beyond.

“I think they were surprised by the response of people wanting to stay in this building, even with its foibles,” Mr. Shear said. “You see these strange little offices. There’s nothing cookie-cutter here. I mean, did you see the 21st floor?” he asked, laughing. “It’s like a place you’d put your mad aunt.”

“It’s a little quirky sometimes, and I think that’s a good thing,” he said. “I think when authors or agents come in here, they feel that kind of quirky energy.”

Alice Sparberg Alexiou, whose history of the building, “The Flatiron: The New York Landmark and the Incomparable City That Arose With It,” will be published by (who else?) St. Martin’s in June, said those who worked within felt emotionally connected to it in a way people in other buildings did not.

Her grandfather bought a share in the building in 1946, and her family was a part owner until 1997.

“The Flatiron has always obsessed people,” she said. “And I think it always will, now that it’s landmarked. Maybe it has something to with the fact that it’s a triangle. Triangles are magical. There’s something almost religious about it.”

She and those working in the building, which has received federal and city landmark status, are eager to see what the Sorgente Group will do when Macmillan’s lease runs out in 2018.

“Can they do something fabulous with that inside space?” Ms. Alexiou said. “Can they take the gritty out of it? I hope they don’t. I don’t think New York has enough gritty anymore.”