

NY CULTURE

## Labor of Love for Flatiron's Superintendent

Sunny Atis has been taking care of storied Manhattan building like it's his own for 26 years



Sunny Atis, who has worked at the Flatiron building for 26 years and is now the superintendent, loves his job at the storied wedge-shaped skyscraper. Photo: Agaton Strom/Video: Jennifer Weiss

By **JENNIFER WEISS**

**6 COMMENTS**

Updated March 31, 2015 8:47 p.m. ET

Before Sunny Atis began working on the maintenance team at the Flatiron Building 26 years ago, he had never heard of the storied wedge-shaped structure at the intersection of Fifth Avenue, Broadway and 23rd Street.

Back then, among other jobs, he helped run the building's old hydraulic elevators, powered by water pressure.

Now the building's superintendent, Mr. Atis, 50 years old, has helped drain 7-foot-high water from the subbasement, rescued people from elevators during a blackout, and spent years tending to the building's 600 or so air-conditioning units and 750 radiators—"rads" as he calls them.

For him, it is a dream job.

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Sunny Atis, longtime superintendent of the Flatiron Building, on its roof. PHOTO: AGATON STROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“There’s only one Flatiron,” he said of the 22-story structure opened in 1902, one of the city’s first skyscrapers. “I’m pretty proud to take care of it.”

Recently, he mused about his job at what he called “one of the best buildings in New York City” as he stood admiring the panoramic views of the city from one of his favorite spots—the triangular office of John Sargent, chief executive of Macmillan Publishers, located at the Flatiron’s rounded, prow-shaped point. “At the end of the day,” he said, “you leave and you go, ‘Wow, that’s pretty cool.’”

Part of the pride comes from the fact that Mr. Atis encounters the building everywhere: in books people give him, on the cover of a recent New Yorker magazine and in posters he sees all over town. “Even at the dentist, I couldn’t escape the Flatiron,” he said.

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The Flatiron Building, at the intersection of Fifth Avenue, Broadway and 23rd Street. PHOTO: AGATON STROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A trip to his modest basement office reveals his own mini-museum of sorts. Crowding the shelves are Flatiron-themed tchotchkes, from Christmas ornaments to an antique flat iron given to him by people he met camping in Pennsylvania. Flatiron posters and postcards line the walls.

He also collects building artifacts: parts of one of its old Otis elevators, a vintage ornate doorknob and a piece of original terra-cotta he salvaged after a repair. Tucked in the back of an adjoining tool room is a mirror Mr. Atis said once hung in a basement restaurant that has long since closed. He said he delights in finding mementoes like a set of initials etched into a brick, dated 1915.

Born in the Bronx to a Puerto Rican mother and Argentine father, Mr. Atis is talkative and quick to laugh, with dark hair and lively brown

eyes. He knows the names of many employees of Macmillan—the building’s sole office tenant, aside from several ground-level shops—and likes to chat them up and ask what they are having for lunch.

In the early years, on a call to change a ceiling tile, he got chatty with a young office worker named Carolyn. He said he stretched the chore, which should have taken just a few minutes, to five hours—and sent her Valentine’s roses the next day. They have been married 20 years.

Jane Gural-Senders, an asset manager with Newmark Grubb Knight Frank, the building’s managing agent—whose family has a stake in the property—said Mr. Atis goes above and beyond basic maintenance. “He’s good because he loves it, because he’s proud of it,” she said. “He’s like an owner.”



Superintendent Sunny Atis in the boiler room of the Flatiron Building. PHOTO: AGATON STROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The week of superstorm Sandy, he spent six nights on the couch in his office with no power or heat. The Sunday after his first week as superintendent 15 years ago, as he was settling in to watch a Jets game at his Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, home, he got a call saying the subbasement had flooded and the boiler was underwater. “I kissed my wife goodbye and said ‘I’ll see you tomorrow,’ ” he said.

And he has seen the building through more than one blackout. During one, he said, he climbed the stairs to the building’s 20th floor to help people who were stuck in an elevator there and on two lower floors.

“He was very concerned everyone was OK,” said Thomas Dunne, publisher of Thomas Dunne Books, who has worked in the building since 1971. “I remember that because it was not his usual expression of cheerfulness.”

That outgoing nature comes in handy when helping the many tourists who pose for pictures with the building or wander into the lobby asking questions. Once, he helped arrange a visit to Mr. Sargent’s office for a marriage proposal in the building’s point.

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Sunny Atis leads a group of visitors to the roof of the Flatiron Building. PHOTO: AGATON STROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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“The knowledge he has of that building is outstanding,” said Veronica Mainetti, president of Sorgente Group of America, which controls a majority stake in the Flatiron. When he talks about the building, she said, “his eyes start to brighten up.” Ms. Mainetti said when Macmillan’s lease comes up, one option for the property could be a hotel conversion.

With boldface names regularly visiting Macmillan to discuss book projects, Mr. Atis has amassed his share of framed celebrity photos. He recalled meeting and singing for Michael Bolton at the building, and asking Cesar Millan, TV’s “dog whisperer,” for advice on his cocker spaniel, Mac.

In his office, Mr. Atis often listens to music—sometimes classical, sometimes rock—as he does paperwork and repairs “rads.”

He mused that he probably spends more time there than he does at home. “So much of my life revolves around this building,” he said.

Where would he be if not for the Flatiron?

“Who knows?” he said. “I’m appreciative of where this building has taken me.”

#### **Corrections & Amplifications:**

Sunny Atis began working on the maintenance team at the Flatiron building 26 years ago and started as superintendent 15 years ago. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that he began working there 27 years ago and started as superintendent 16 years ago. (3/31/15)

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