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A New Spin On Emery Roth

By MICHAEL M. GRYNBAUM

WHEN Devonshire House, a 1928 Emery Roth building, was sold in 2008 to a group of developers, marking the end of decades as a prime Greenwich Village rental, residents knew change was afoot.

Construction workers and machinery filled the hallways as the developers, including the real estate magnate (and partial Mets owner) Fred Wilpon, began the process of carving spacious modern condominiums out of the building's 131

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modest one- and two-bedroom units. Leases for market-rate tenants were not renewed, leaving only a few dozen rent-stabilized stalwarts in place.

But of the longtime residents who managed to stay, many assumed that the Devonshire's unique aesthetic — a hodgepodge of English, Spanish and Gothic influences — would be left alone. The building, perched on the southeast corner of East 10th Street and University Place, has an eclectic Old World charm and a name-brand architect to boot: Roth, the maestro of Central Park West's Deco skyline, is considered one of Manhattan's finest residential designers. Surely, such features would

still prove marketable today.

Turns out that prewar appeal has its limits. A large-scale redesign has already ripped up part of Devonshire's distinctive lobby, a time-warped salmagundi of faux-wood walls, Gothic details and an imposing coffered ceiling that brings to mind the faded Oxford common rooms of "Brideshead Revisited." Now tenants are anxious about the fate of what they consider the jewel of their meticulously designed home.

"It's such a destruction of an architectural wonder," said Susan Bolotin, 59, the editor in chief of Workman Publishing and a 30-year resident of the building. "It's a sense of aesthetic outrage. We've been told they can do whatever they want."

Longtime residents consider the lobby singular and charming, a homey but elaborate space that often impresses guests. Stained-glass windows, topped by gothic arches, allow a view of a sunny courtyard, guarded by a row of small Corinthian columns. Elevator doors are embossed with the Cavendish coat of arms, the seal of a family whose ancestral home in England shares a name with the Manhattan residence.

"For as long as I owned the building," recalled William Felder, the former proprietor, "people would come in off the street and just fawn over that lobby."

But the new owners, conscious of the real estate consumer's fickle taste, say they are looking to brighten a dingy space. "We are trying to take a tired property and freshen it up," Susan Hewitt, the project's lead developer, said in a telephone interview. "The general effect we are trying to do is make it seem



COURTESY OF WILLIAM FELDER

OLD An undated photograph of the Devonshire lobby.



JON WALSON

NEW A rendering of changes planned by new owners.

slightly less sepulchral."

Ms. Hewitt, who has done condominium conversions on other properties with historic significance, does not draw her adjectives from thin air. The lobby had a sense of shabby elegance: the ornate ceiling is dulled by a tobacco-stained hue, and the yellowish faux-wood floor, a rare feature in Manhattan buildings, is scuffed and scratched.

The renovations — assigned to the designer Victoria Hagan — call for the installation of a black-and-white checkerboard floor; a lighter shade of paint for the walls and an off-white hue for the ceiling. A concierge desk is also planned.

The starkest departure from the current look is the black-and-white floor, which some tenants worry will clash with the old-English atmosphere. Ms. Hewitt said the design had "ample historical precedent" in Manhattan prewar buildings, and Ms. Hagan said she was being "very sensitive" to the original.

"That's something I think I'm good at, understanding something that's old and giving it fresh life for a new time," Ms. Hagan said recently, while oversee-

ing construction of a new apartment on the building's fourth floor.

It would seem unthinkable to tinker with Roth's more famous works in the city, including the Beresford and San Remo apartments on the Upper West Side; both have landmark status. And wealthy buyers happily snap up 1920s co-ops on Fifth Avenue that contain the best (rock-solid walls, original moldings) and worst (ancient plumbing) qualities of prewar construction.

But the success of 15 Central Park West, Robert A. M. Stern's homage to old-school New York living, may suggest that buyers want a more modern take on the classics: prewar with postwar perks.

Meanwhile, the tenants at Devonshire remain unimpressed. A few reached out to preservationist societies in hopes of halting the renovation, to no avail. Interior spaces cannot be declared landmarks in New York.

"The lobby, as it is, is quite beautiful," said David Mann, the president of MR Architecture and Decor, who has rented a penthouse studio in the building for nearly two decades. "I am fearful about

what they might do that may never be changed back. To rip out the floors, to me, is a crime."

Ms. Bolotin sounded pained when discussing the changes. "I remember moving in and learning about Emery Roth and the buildings he had done on Central Park West; there's a sense of—" she paused, then sighed — "I guess this doesn't mean much, but there's a sense of neighborhood pride. I raised my children there. We've seen generations come and go. People love living there."

The former owner, Mr. Felder, said that the Devonshire's purchasers had every right to change the lobby. "In their defense, I have to say, throughout the years, we've always had trouble maintaining that floor," he said. "You can clean it, but it just always looks dirty."

But Mr. Felder paused when told that a black-and-white checkerboard pattern was under consideration.

"That could be fairly atrocious," he said, after some contemplation. "If it was my decision and I had to replace the floor, I would replace it with some kind of stone."