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Rejuvenating a Giant

A lovingly revamped Empire State Building has a new elevator and flashier exhibits to go with the great views and that big ape.

By JAMES S. RUSSELL

How do you take the measure of a New York City more physically transformed than at any time since the 1920s? The new glass "downtowns" that have exploded in the last decade and a half in Long Island City and over in Jersey City. Hudson Yards' crystalline shafts to the far west. Residential towers marching in lock step along the Queens and Brooklyn edges of the East River. The skinny supertalls slicing into the view of Central Park.

There has never been a better time to give Gotham a fresh look, and so I headed to the exalted altitude of New York's first supertall: the Empire State Building, which has just spent $165 million and four years meticulously revamping the experience of getting to — and appreciating — the views from its two vertiginous observatories on the 86th and 102nd floors. Simultaneously, its designers have tried to banish the things visitors hate about the observation-deck trek: the lines, the crowds, the congestion.

This is the third phase of a reimagining of what its designers call "The Observatory Experience," and on Oct. 7, the changes will be revealed to the public. The owner of the building, Empire State Realty Trust, has created a new entrance, and a 10,000-square-foot exhibition that not only fascinates in its own right (you can be Fay Wray to a realistically animated King Kong) but also reduces the lines to a security checkpoint. The ride is a mere 55 seconds to the 86th-floor observatory, which has been spruced up. And then there's the crowning

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A view of the Empire State Building from the observation deck at Rockefeller Center.

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A look at three other observatories that offer distinct experiences. Page 16.

MARK WICKENS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

HOLLAND COTTER | ART REVIEW

A Rebellion Brought Into Focus

VIA THE ALVIN BALTROP TRUST; THIRD STREAMING AND GALERIE BUCHHOLZ

Alvin Baltrop captured gay culture amid the derelict piers.

The Life and Times of Alvin Baltrop
Bronx Museum of the Arts

NEW YORK CITY IS a gateway for fresh art talent but it's also an archive of art careers past. Some are visible, in the "active" file. Most are buried deep.

A few surface only after artists have departed, as is the case with the American photographer Alvin Baltrop, who was unknown to the mainstream art world when he died in 2004 at 55, and who now has a bright, tough monument of a retrospective at the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

The show, "The Life and Times of Alvin Baltrop," is also a monument to New York itself during the 1970s and '80s, when Mr. Baltrop did his major work. During those decades, the city was physically falling apart. At the same time, it radiated creative energy. Among other things, in the wake of the 1969 Stonewall uprising, it was home base for a new gay consciousness.

Disintegration and rebellion dovetailed in a line of derelict shipping piers that stretched the Hudson River between Chelsea and Greenwich Village. Isolated from the rest of the city after the collapse of the southernmost section of the elevated West Side Highway, the piers became a preserve for gay sex and communion, and the primary subject of Mr. Baltrop's surviving photographs. These include architectural studies of the piers, but also shots of their semi-residential population of homeless people, teenage runaways, sexual adventurers, criminals and artists, a company that Mr. Baltrop, in effect, joined.

At a glance, he might have seemed an out-

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Alvin Baltrop viewed life on the piers both from afar and up close. Left, a man on a ledge (1975-86).

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK WICKENS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Empire State Building Observatory
Open daily from 8 a.m. to 2 a.m.; $38 for an adult ticket to access the exhibition and 86th-floor observatory; there's an additional $20 fee for the 102nd-floor deck (starting Oct. 7). A variety of upgrades can push the price to $460. More information: esbnyc.com.

Rejuvenating a Giant

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glory of the rehabilitation, the glass elevator trip to the 102nd floor. It's a 1,224-foot-high aerie, exhilarating and intimate.

I got a sneak peak over the past month as construction was wrapping up, and my first looks suggest the revamped observatory is likely to become a must-see, even for jaded natives. But I urge you to leave the selfie stick at home, and just look.

Why tamper with a beloved symbol of New York's exuberance and striving? The Realty Trust — which derives $132 million annually from the observatories' four million visitors — brought in Thinc Design (which conceived the 9/11 Memorial & Museum exhibits) and a team of consultants because it wants you to love it even more.

Their strategy has been to engage the expectations that people "have assigned to the building in their hearts and minds," Anthony E. Malkin, the Realty Trust's chairman and chief executive, said.

The changes start right on West 34th Street, west of Fifth Avenue. A generous entrance through former storefronts has been dedicated to the observatory, replacing the human traffic jam that afflicted the tower's office lobby. Art Deco building details have been reproduced and giant historical photos enliven the path to a security checkpoint. "Everything is created to help fuel the emotional connection people have with the building before they arrive," Tom Hennes, the founder of Thinc, said on a walk-through.

A 24-foot-tall model of the building offers itself as a photo backdrop as visitors ascend a glinting stainless-steel staircase to a 10,000-square-foot exhibition on the building's history and pop-culture significance. The landing in front of the model becomes an amiable scrum with strangers helping families pose and people trading phones and cameras. Such photo ops (which are abundant) slow people down, which minimizes congestion at the six elevators devoted to the observatory.

The displays demonstrate how digitally driven showmanship can take a potentially dull idea — explaining how the building was built — and turn it into a delightful experience. In one large space, a combination of live-action film and computer animation brings all four walls alive with the bustle of steel girders being twirled in space by unseen cranes and workers riveting columns with the city spreading out beyond. You feel as if you're a construction worker on the framework of the building, in Lewis W. Hine's famous photographs from 1931.

Statues of workers are placed to invite visitors to pose for photos. I realized that memory-making was being shamelessly engineered, but I happily succumbed.

There are other exhibits that intrigue, including one on elevators, a celebrity gallery that reminded me to feel good about the glamorous company I was keeping and the inevitable inclusion of King Kong fending off buzzing airplanes (which he did in the Empire State's first appearance in a movie, in 1933).

As an array of 72 screens shows off the building's cultural bona fides in movies, comics and video games — a three-minute-and-21-second barrage of 188 images and film clips — I began to wonder just how a building that opened in the depths of the Great Depression became such a potent symbol of New York City. I was inspired by the exhibitions to dig deeper.

Alfred E. Smith, a former governor of New York, announced the Empire State Building in 1929, at the peak of a building frenzy not so different from that which preceded the 2008 crash or . . . now. That year, developers were proposing 100-story towers right and left.

The prolific skyscraper architects at Shreve, Lamb & Harmon turned to their advantage the development team's insistence on simplicity of detail in order to erect the building quickly. In 16 rapid-fire designs the architects streamlined the standard "wedding cake" model, getting rid of the serial setbacks that had resulted from a zoning regulation intended to maintain daylight on the street. The architects shifted most of the bulk into a 25,000-square-foot shaft that rises in blond fluted limestone from the center of a five-story base to the 80th floor, with just a few shallow setbacks.

The building's surface was devised with similar economy of means, aesthetic and material, with vertical strips of windows alternating with patterned, pewter-colored aluminum panels. The shaft anticipated the stripped-clean imagery of International Modernism that would soon come to prominence.

In contrast to the sobriety of the shaft, the mooring mast rises 200 feet above the 86th-floor observatory, a glowing glass tube with exuberant Art Deco bird-wing buttresses. (It's called a mast because it was allegedly capable of tethering passing dirigibles — an idea that could be entertained only at the height of Jazz Age lunacy.) An elevator runs up the mast, depositing visitors at the enclosed, and much smaller, 102nd-floor observatory. Critics who liked the monumental grandeur of the shaft called the mooring mast "a silly gesture" and "a public comfort station for migratory birds."

The shaft and mast together create the famous silhouette that "emerges above New York like a great inland lighthouse," according to the 1939 WPA Guide to New York City. (A needlelike radio spire was mounted atop the mast in 1950.)

Construction began in March 17, 1930, just months after the stock market crash. The $41-million building was erected at breathtaking speed, four-and-a-half floors per week, and opened less than 14 months later on May 1, 1931. In "My Lost City," a collection of essays, F. Scott Fitzgerald observed, "From the ruins [of the stock-market crash], lonely and inexplicable as the sphinx, rises the Empire State Building."

I viewed the inside of the mast as a new glass elevator was being installed and a "cocoon" — an engineering tour de force that hung from the mast to protect construction workers hanging high in the air — was coming down. The painstaking, weather-dependent process has pushed the reopening of the 102nd floor observatory from late September to Oct. 7. The ride will, for the first time, offer glimpses of the intricate steel framing that supports the mast, the backside of the aluminum buttresses and translucent panels that transmit the mast's nighttime glow.

The glass elevator unveils the 360-degree panorama. Around the circular perimeter, full-height glass replaces high windows. The space, only 30 feet in diameter, is intimate, like a thrillingly vertiginous pilot house more than 1,200 feet above the city.

GETTY IMAGES

The open-air terrace that most people visit, wrapping the 86th floor, has been little altered from the early years with its limestone balustrade and familiar stainless-steel grillwork. In gazing over the transformed city beyond, I saw strange echoes of the time when the Empire State was conceived.

In a 1931 opening-day photo that I recalled from the second floor, the gridded streets stretch in an almost flat plane south to Manhattan's tip, where the financial district rises Oz-like, crowned by spiky 1920s towers. It is startling how raw the 40- to 60-story Jazz Age towers looked, erupting out of a sea of loft buildings to the east and west of Grand Central Terminal. They included the Chanin building, with swirling plants embossed on its facade and the Chrysler, with its giant stainless-steel gargoyles. Buildings so tall and thin were recognized even at the time as not particularly practical or economic. But in the bubbly optimism of the late 1920s, exuberant architecture and great height were seen as acts of marketing, essential to attract prestige tenants, "presumably for the world to look at and talk about and only subsequently for people to dwell in," Elmer Davis wrote in The New Republic in 1932.

It probably felt then not so terribly different from the view I was taking in — looking north at the supertall condo boom, and the skinny towers of Billionaire's Row slicing up what remains of the view of Central Park.

As I exited the Empire State through the Fifth Avenue lobby, with its ceiling a celebratory cosmos of gold-leaf stars and planets above sober walls of book-matched marble, I was reminded of a time when architects (and their clients) considered the impact buildings made in the skyline as a kind of sacred trust — a symbol of the city's energy, grace and confidence, a contribution to its identity. Are we thinking hard enough about how today's skyline will measure up 100 years from now?

Clockwise from top: a new model of the Empire State Building in the ground floor lobby is an inviting backdrop for photographs; a photo from around 1947 shows how the city looked then from the 86th floor observatory; the second floor now includes a gallery of celebrity visitors; and the building's ground floor lobby has a model of the building.