



STUDIO CITY

For artists and designers, 80 West 40th Street has an illustrious pedigree. Carole Nicksin rides the elevator.

Whether you're on the outside looking in or inside looking out, it's the windows that you'll notice at 80 West 40th Street in Midtown Manhattan.

Bryant Park Studios, a 10-story red-brick-and-limestone structure, was one of the first high-rise artists' buildings in the city to feature double-height studios with windows extending nearly floor to ceiling. Each studio faces north, taking advantage of the unobstructed light over the park.

Over the years, the 1961 Beaux Arts-style building has attracted an eclectic roster of tenants,

Carole Nicksin is a writer in New York.

including the photographers Edward Steichen, Irving Penn and Bert Stern, and the designers Donna Karan and Liz Claiborne. The interior designers Joe D'Urso, Bob Bray and Michael Schaible brought a modern aesthetic to a studio in the building.

The interior designer Thad Hayes started his career in the building in the 80's when he went to work for Bray-Schaible Design, whose eighth-floor office he now occupies. He was entranced by its dramatic windows. "It resonated like a Hollywood-set version of a design studio," Hayes said.

For Bray, his first encounter with the building in the mid-70's was a kind of love-at-first-sight swoon.

Bray and Schaible had been sharing a space uptown with D'Urso, "and Stan Herman dragged us down there," Bray said. "I wasn't about to move from 67th Street to druggy Bryant Park, but we walked in and took it on the spot."

Herman, a clothing designer and the president of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, also recalls immediately falling under the space's spell. "I went to the building to buy fabric one day and saw the windows and the fireplace, and I had to have it," he said. That was in 1975. Today, he is the building's longest-running tenant. He credits his eighth-floor studio view for inspiring him to stage the Seventh on Sixth fashion shows in the park.

Some of the building's enduring charms might be traceable to the good taste of Abraham Archibald Anderson, a painter and philanthropist from New Jersey, who commissioned the building. Anderson studied art in Paris after the Civil War and befriended many notables, like Thomas Edison, the subject of a well-known Anderson painting, and Theodore Roosevelt, who

Top: Bryant Park Studios, 1901, left the shared offices of D'Urso Design and Bray-Schaible Design, 1975. Above: Edward Steichen's photo of the Sixth Avenue fit tracks from his studio in the building.

appointed Anderson as the superintendent of Yellowstone Forest Reserve for a time.

Anderson enlisted Charles A. Rich to design the building, and he brought in French craftsmen for detail work, much of which survives. In the penthouse foyer, original terrazzo tiles were hidden under grime. "We poured acid over it, and this came out," said David Seeve, who manages the property for the Mountain Development Corporation.

An old bathroom in the penthouse is now a closet but still fit for a mermaid, with a cobalt blue tile floor and abalone shells in the walls. A fireplace is covered in raw, jagged stone that is likely amethyst, and on a lower floor, another fireplace has a frieze of jester faces and Heurs-dieus.

The penthouse's main room

has an intricately carved skylight painted over on the inside and tarred over outside; Seeve hopes to have it restored. He also suspects a pipe organ is lurking in a penthouse wall. "We've seen photos of a large organ in this room, and we wonder if it might still be here."

Part of the building's lore involves the Drew sisters, a pair of eccentric ladies who inhabited the penthouse from the 1950's through the early 90's.

"They were two sisters who came from New Jersey," Herman said. "I had tea with them every Thursday. One was a portrait painter; the other was a pianist." Herman remembers other tenants scoffing at the sisters' shabby way of dressing, but Herman found them charming.

Today the artists are gone, and most of the occupants are in the garment business. But in its heyday, the studios attracted many photographers. Irving Penn had two units for about 10 years, starting in the 1950's. "We dressed the girls in the upper studio, and they walked down to the lower studio," he said. Among the many women he photographed was a "little girl" who, he said, "came to pose, because somebody at Vogue liked her, and she turned out to be Jane Fonda.

"I asked, 'Are you going to be an actress?' And she said, 'My God, no!'"

Penn also recalled an anecdote about Bert Stern supposedly taking a small elephant up in an elevator. Shortly after, a sign appeared saying, "No more elephants in the passenger elevator."

Squeezing an elephant into the elevator would be quite a feat. Although there used to be a freight elevator at the rear, the larger of the two passenger elevators measures only about 12½ square feet, a detail that Herman says has been instrumental in shaping the character of the building. "They keep certain businesses out," he said.

For his part, Stern does not recall bringing an elephant up in the elevator. ("I seem to remember a camel, but that was another building," he said.) But he does remember running into Penn in the elevators. "He was nice to me. I'd see him in the elevator, and he'd say, 'That was a very good photo you had in this issue of Look.'"

Being in a building with a photographer of Penn's stature was part of what prompted Stern to take a studio. The other factor was the windows. "It was my first real studio," Stern said. "I took it because of the light. I didn't know how to use light, so for my first two years as a photographer, I shot everything outdoors, on the beach, that sort of thing." He heard of the studio from a woman he was dating. "It was a fabulous place, and with the windows, I could photograph in there using just the available light."

Hayes returned to the building last fall, when Bray and Schaible closed their business and asked him if he wanted to take over the space. "I said of course, without thinking. I had been looking for a larger space. By moving into this office, I committed to not growing too much, but I think that might be a blessing. It will be my office until I retire, God willing."

Bray echoes the sentiment. "My life has taken place there," he said. "There are very few things that catch my attention really, but that building always did." ■