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Let There Be Light

A developer tries to brighten up the dim corridor known as 6½ Avenue



A rendering of the entrance to 6½ Avenue from 52nd Street, with the lobby of 135 W. 52nd St., a luxury condominium set to open in 2016. PHOTO: WILLIAMS NEW YORK

By KAYA LATERMAN
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0 COMMENTS

Unless you work in one of the office buildings near 6½ Avenue—the mid-block passageway that runs from West 51st Street to West 57th—you’re unlikely to stumble upon the obscure pedestrian corridor.

The avenue, clearly marked with signs from the city’s Department of Transportation since 2012, cuts through several office lobbies and other privately owned public spaces. So far, it has been heralded for its one defining function: to help pedestrians get from point A to point B faster.

Now, the developers behind the hotel-to-condominium conversion at 135 W. 52nd St. are trying to make a slice of the passageway a place to stop and hang out, rather than a place to walk through.

“When I first saw the corridor, I noticed that it was a space where people were leaving,” said Thierry Dreyfus, a renowned French lighting designer hired by the Chetrit Group and Clipper Equity LLC, owners of the building that housed the former Flatotel, which abuts the avenue.



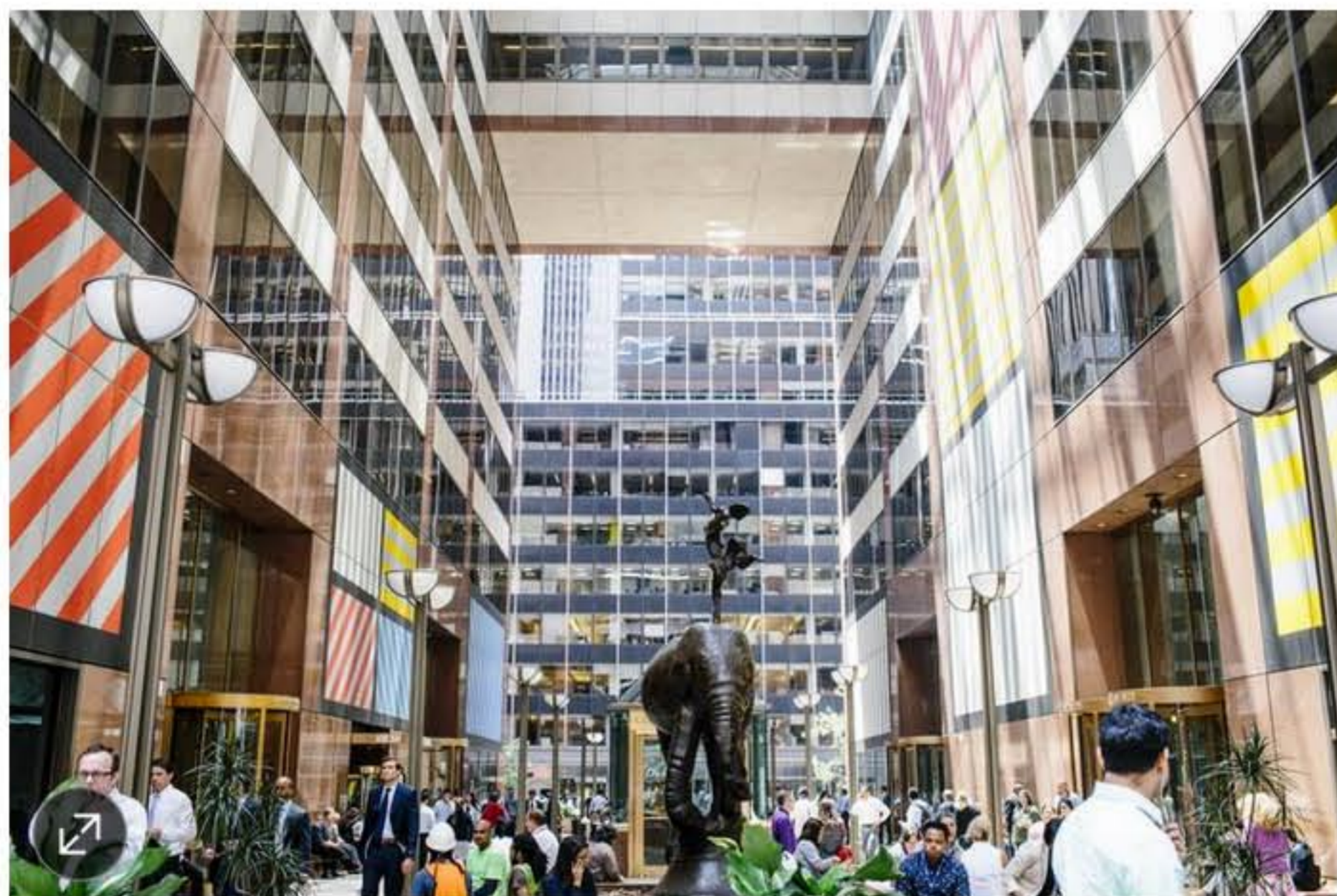
A dimly lit section of the corridor. PHOTO: ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

With his clients transforming the property into a luxury residential tower—a five-bedroom penthouse unit is available for \$16.8 million—Mr. Dreyfus said he wants to bring some “poetry” to a space that lacks creativity.

“The big question I asked myself was how I could use light to lure people to stay there and not move,” he said during a phone interview from his home in Paris.

After feeling a cross breeze while standing in the corridor, Mr. Dreyfus decided to suspend dozens of copper tubes with light bulbs on the ends, to resemble stars. The rods will move with the wind, which he hopes will make a pleasant sound that prompts people to stop, look up and listen.

“The speed of Midtown is fast,” he said. “Maybe this will help slow people down.”



Visual clutter and inconsistent architecture mark the pedestrian pathway. PHOTO: ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Dreyfus also designed the lighting that traces the facade of the 48-story building, which features a 400-foot, lighted structural beam running vertically up the center.

“Lighting design is something that has been used to great effect in New York City before—think of the Empire State Building’s iconic nightly display—but it isn’t something you typically see on a luxury residential building,” said executive Jonathan Chetrit. “We felt there was a unique opportunity to do something with lighting not just for the sake of doing it, but to approach it as a work of art.”

The focus for Rick Parisi, managing principal at M. Paul Friedberg & Partners, which worked on landscape design, was to create “a sense of connectivity” for the residents to their new home, which is in an area defined by tall office buildings and little greenery.

“It’s certainly hard to humanize a long and narrow space that’s essentially used as a cut-through to somewhere else,” Mr. Parisi said.

He selected a 120-foot-long ivy green wall so it could take advantage of natural light from an existing glass canopy that stretches over two-thirds of the corridor.

He also added tables and chairs, along with wide wooden benches, so people would have a place to grab a bite or chat with friends. He placed a lighted water wall on 52nd Street to draw people into the walkway, Mr. Parisi said.

There are five other mid-block pedestrian passageways in the city that are privately owned public spaces, according to Jerold Kayden, founder of the group Advocates for Privately Owned Public Spaces and a professor of urban planning and design at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design.

“What’s nice about this [redesign] is if the public deems it as an improvement, then the entire 6½ Avenue network may be upgraded,” he said.

The most common criticism of the walkway is that it’s dark and that the design of each block isn’t uniform, as a different architect designed each building. Mr. Kayden describes walking there as a “sterile, unpleasant experience.”



“The avenue was designed for shortcutting and to ease congestion, which it has done,” he said. “But 6½ Avenue won’t realize its full potential until the buildings’ owners are encouraged to coordinate and do something to freshen things up.”

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