

HABITAT HOTLINE

FORBES-ERGAS DESIGN ASSOCIATES



LOBBY REDESIGN

War and Peace BY FRANK LOVECE

Lobby redesign? It can feel like being on the receiving end of a battering ram. As any board member who's ever endured it knows, any attempt to redo a lobby – the main portal that everyone in the building sees and experiences – too often ends in psychological warfare, with shareholders and condo-owners complaining about it to you in the elevator, over the phone...or in the lobby!

That's what makes the case of 401 East 86th Street instructive. It went smoothly.

Certainly it's not the only co-op where that's true. But its particulars make it a textbook example of how to do it right – and this in a 227-unit building that's not all spotlights and roses. "I also did the hallway project," remembers board president Stephanie Goldman, referring to a building-wide refurbishing completed about a year ago. "That whole process, oh my God! I was getting hassled in the elevator, hassled in the lobby, angry e-mails." But the lobby-redesign project, she says, "was just beautiful."

The board's secret? Communication, teamwork, and letting the designers design. "We did approve everything they showed us, but we let them direct us," Goldman notes.

That's more unusual than you might think. While the average person wouldn't think of writing an opera or performing surgery, a surprising number fancy themselves interior designers. "They misinterpret taste for design discipline," says Joel Ergas of Manhattan's Forbes-Ergas Design Associates, who did the lobby redesign with senior associate Stephen Stanczyk and with architect Dennis M. Mele of Midtown Preservation. "When they give us their objective, and we convert that objec-



Frank Lovece, a freelance writer, is a co-op owner. The author of a number of books, including The X-Files Declassified, he wrote "Hollywood Shuffle," about renting out building space to filmmakers, in the June Habitat.

Make lobby not war: artist's rendering (top) and actual 401 East 86th space.

tive to a design solution, that produces a better job since it opens their minds to what the possibilities are, rather than [staying with] preconceived notions.”

“Everyone is very aware of their particular aesthetic sense,” adds Stanczyk, “and while it may work for a person individually, our challenge is to work as a team for what’s best for the building.”

The process began with an unusual situation: redoing the lobby was compelled by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which required the installation of a wheelchair ramp. That in itself wasn’t unusual, but the building’s entrance and lobby encompass three levels: one at the street level, followed by a sunken lobby, and then five steps to reach the mailroom and the elevators. The overall rise was 30 inches, and to comply with ADA standards for maximum incline, there had to be a 30-foot ramp – which had to fit into a space that also contained a concierge desk and seating. “You can’t imagine this job – its intricacy,” says Goldman.

The first step in preventing problems was the board’s decision not to go with the lowest bidder. “There wasn’t even a question about it,” notes Goldman, who recalls: “We had three bids,” solicited by Goodstein Management, the co-op’s agent, “and we ended up with the middle guy. The one guy was too cheap, and the [other] guy was so expensive, it was ridiculous.”

Similarly, she says, Forbes-Ergas was the only one whom she felt brought a presentation “with not just a portfolio of their work, but things to show us for our own building, specific ideas.”

Once that was decided upon, the board gave flexible directives, stressing only that the ramp “needed to be functional, but not an eyesore,” says Goldman. “And we wanted the colors to flow smoothly into the hallways. We’re not designers. We said, ‘Show us some samples and we’ll pick.’”

The next step was open and frequent communication. Joseph Mosomillo, president of Integrity Contracting, suggested a weekly meeting with the board. “It’s the only way to maintain a schedule and the flow of information,” he observes. “We keep our own minutes” in addition to the board’s, providing a backup to lessen the chance of things getting missed, “and an agenda of things to review – confirmation of deliveries, design issues, and field conditions.”

“Integrity really was on top of everything,” says Goldman. “Joe was at ev-

ery meeting. He caught so many little things. We went down the list, and everything was done, or here’s what wasn’t done, and why, and this is when it will be done.”

Ergas and Stanczyk were at the weekly meetings as well – as was someone else who was immensely critical to a smooth operation: Ray Gonzalez, the building superintendent.

“I don’t know what we’d have done without him,” Goldman says with enthusiasm. “He was instrumental. He knows so much about the air conditioning, about the wiring. He was at all the meetings. He helped with the organization of everything. He was there all the time just watching out for everything. When something needed to be looked after or called up, he did it.

“We’ve just sent a letter to the residents so that they’ll know how hard the building staff worked through this renovation: not one package went astray, not one piece of mail went missing even though we had only a makeshift mailroom in the [main] lobby when the [actual] mailroom was being done. We had not one complaint that services were disrupted, or that they didn’t get help when they needed it. That starts at the top, with the super.”

That letter is one example of the frequent communication that needs to flow from the board to the residents. General updates appeared in the building’s quarterly newsletter and, in between, memos were slipped under residents’ doors whenever there was an inconvenience going on. Good information, and plenty of it, helps head off the kinds of problems that can arise when people are left out of the loop, which can make them feel undervalued and thus resentful.

The key is treating people – from super to subcontractor – like professionals. You have to stay highly involved. “Stephanie is very tough,” says Mosomillo, “and the ideal representative of the co-op [residents] in that they’re paying for things and they want what they’re paying for. She demanded proper service, and [in turn] explained to the board why we would do things the way they were done” – but she did not micro-manage.

“You can’t second-guess everything,” Goldman says. “If you don’t trust who you picked, then you picked the wrong person.” **H**