

A comeback at Ground Zero

BY ROBERT KAHN

Staff Writer

After Cass Gilbert's copper-topped landmark at 90 West St. was pulverized by debris from the World Trade Center, debate raged over whether the 1907 tower, then a commercial property, could even be saved.

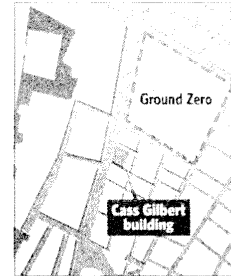
This morning, the apartment rental office at the converted building opens for business, conclusively answering that question, and making way for more heartening, less consequential ones: Should the track lighting in the model one-bedroom be angled to flatter the GE stainless steel oven, or adjusted to accentuate the bamboo-plank floors?

Some \$150 million — part from Liberty Bonds and tax incentives, part from owners Kibel Co., Brack Capital and BD Hotels — has gone into replacing 7,000 pieces of terra-cotta façade, repairing the iconic roof and gutting the neo-Gothic property's scarred interior.

Move-ins at the 410-unit complex begin May 1, with full occupancy expected by late July.

Pets are welcome. "I've worked here so long now I'm almost immune to this view," said Andrew Gordon, construction project manager for Levine Builders, as he looked out a window of Unit 6D and into the bathtub at Ground Zero.

Architects and engineers say the 24-story 90 West survived Sept. 11 partly because its northern façade was already covered in scaffolding for a two-year renovation nearing its end. They also credit the four-story granite base, heat-resistant terra-cotta paneling and marble-and-steel stairwells.



Still, the steakhouse on the ground floor was destroyed by cascading steel. On the north face, fixtures and ornamentation of lions and eagles were blown away. Copper sheets on the sloping mansard roof were peeled off like the tab on a coffee-cup lid. Inside, fire burned for three days.

In their efforts to rebuild, project executives, led by H. Thomas O'Hara Architects and Levine Builders, have far surpassed in expenditures and detail the interrupted renovation.

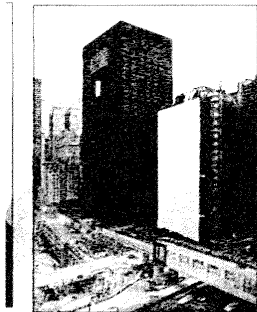
The top floors of 90 West are home to dozens of gargoyles — owls, goat heads and griffins, more than 100 of which needed replacement — but the building's most identifiable feature is the 45-foot mansard roof. The Seaboard Weatherproofing Co. reproduced every detail of Gilbert's original, spending more than \$4 million in copper decoration alone. (The entire building cost \$2 million to construct a century ago.)

When contractors took down the block walls and flat ceiling in the lobby, they discovered vaulted arches and dozens of decorative cast iron eagle talons, which had been covered for half a century. They are all now exposed.

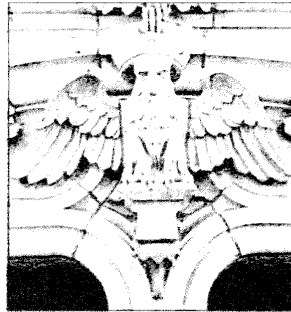
Peter Levenson, a principal of Kibel, deflects questions about the emotional impact of the project and its 9/11 wounds, preferring to dwell on going forward, or looking back even further in time, to the engineering decisions master architect Gilbert made.

"It was solidly built 100 years ago," Levenson said. "Obviously, it's withstood quite a lot."

PHOTOS BY JORI KLEIN



90 West, right, and the Deutsche Bank building covered in 2002.



An eagle on the 15th floor, above. At left, the building free of its netting.

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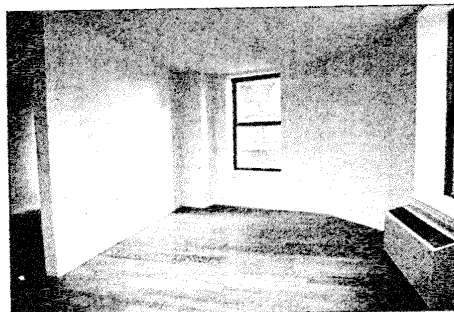


A row of gargoyles perched atop the 20th floor facade on West Street. In the background, modern buildings from Battery Park City, and beyond them to the south, Govern



The lobby last week, where interior renovation continues. Rents start at \$1,475 for studios and go to \$5,300 a month for three-bedrooms.

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An empty two bedroom apartment on the 6th floor. Move-ins at the 410-unit complex begin May 1, with full occupancy expected by late July.



Peter Levenson, a part owner of the building, and a new gargoyle inset, based on his face. Prospective tenants can call 212-587-9090 or go to 90westst.com.