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STREETSCAPES | LEXINGTON AVENUE

## The Sleeping Beauties of Hotel Alley

Travel



Office for Metropolitan History

A 1928 view of the Hotel Montclair shows its original marquee and its elephant-head supports.

By [CHRISTOPHER GRAY](#)

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FEW new buildings have gone up since the 1920s on Hotel Alley, the stretch of Lexington north of Grand Central with a little clutch of hotels. But that doesn't mean that there has been no change, as almost every hotel has been updated in an effort to set itself apart on this narrow, traffic-clogged avenue.

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Office for Metropolitan History  
The Hotel Lexington, as seen from the Hotel Barclay's roof in 1954.

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Tina Fineberg for The New York Times  
One of the elephants.

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A walking tour of Lexington's hotel zone starts at the northeast corner of 47th Street with the Roger Smith, an absolutely forgettable design of 1925 by Denby & Nute. In 1991, it was recast as what its Web site calls "a New York art hotel," and it even has its own blog.

The proprietor, James Knowles, an artist, gave the fusty old name a SoHo panache, and jazzed up the cornice with a crinkly run of metal, like an aluminum foil snake. Mr. Knowles also created a ground-floor frieze of shaped metal ductwork, crimped and folded like a kindergarten art project.

A few years shy of its majority, the art hotel is somewhat worn, but remains a document in the history of neo-hipster attitude.

At the southeast corner of 48th Street and Lexington stands the chunky, pyramid-topped Hotel Lexington of 1929, designed by Schultze & Weaver and now the Radisson Lexington. The main entrance is on the side street, but someone gave the ancillary entryway on Lexington an interesting twist. Usually these are just narrow corridors, but this one is flanked by a Starbucks on both sides, a Frappuccino gauntlet.

Step into the lobby to see, behind the reception desk, a great illuminated clock face with a second hand that has a hypnotic sweep.

On the outside, the flagstaffs were at some point radically downsized, and the smaller flagpoles were stuck in at lower angles, sort of like broken arrows, with a disrespectful, throwaway cast. Better not to fly the flag at all.



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Tina Fineberg for The New York Times

Today rechristened the W, it still is graced by a few of the elephant busts.

On the west side of Lexington, from 48th and 49th, the expansive 1926 Barclay was designed by Cross & Cross as a hotel version of a Park Avenue apartment house, with beautiful limestone on the ground floor, rich with fossil shells and sea creatures, and a facade as confident and debonair as [Gene Kelly](#) on a dance floor.

The polished brown and black marble door surround on the 48th Street side is sumptuous, and the hotel, now given a blocklong name — InterContinental the Barclay New York — is a standout in magnificent condition.

Facing the Barclay across Lexington, [the 1924 Shelton Hotel](#) was designed by [Arthur Loomis Harmon](#) and was much admired for its picturesque massing. Now it is the Marriott East Side, and the architects Perkins Eastman gave it the projecting glass and stainless steel canopy in 2000. In several decades these fixtures will come to be viewed as distinctive of the turn of the 21st century, just as mansard roofs are of the 1870s.

Emery Roth designed the Hotel Montclair, at the northeast corner of 49th, in 1928. This is now the W Hotel, remodeled in 2008, with a startling lobby designed by BBG-BBGM. It makes the offbeat Roger Smith look positively staid, with columns wrapped in metallic curtains, '60s tiled columns, and panels of dried moss and fruit slices. The concierge desk has a chromed sign that says “Whatever,” and it seems as if everything is at an angle.

On the outside, the W overlooked one detail, a quartet of elephant heads at the third floor, with their trunks wrapped around vestigial poles once used to hold up the old-fashioned marquee of 1928. An ingenious touch of whimsy, the elephants are a fitting match to the rats on the marquee poles on the Graybar Building, at 43rd Street, which was designed in 1926 by Sloan & Robertson. But the busts are now damaged and rusty, with missing tusks and trunks, a neglected menagerie.

Even without the W, the 1931 Waldorf-Astoria, between 49th and 50th and running to Park Avenue, looks tired and worn out, although this is admittedly its secondary facade. Designed by Schultze & Weaver, it does, however, have some of the best flagpole bases in New York, massive things of battleship quality, worthy of the American empire.

At the northeast corner of 50th stands the Beverly, built in 1927 by Moses Ginsberg, who was also [behind the Carlyle](#). Designed by [Emery Roth and Sylvan Bien](#) and now named the Benjamin, it has a skillful progression of setbacks. The architects also gave the hotel a voluptuous Spanish-style lobby, encrusted like a galleon, in blue, maroon, gold and amber. Today all that has been wiped out by an attack of beige, a victory of the inoffensive, what might be called Time-Share Style.

Hotel Alley stops at 51st Street, with [Morris Lapidus](#)'s Summit Hotel of 1961, now a Doubletree. The architectural establishment always snickered at Lapidus, the designer of the Eden Roc and the Fontainebleau in Miami Beach, and the Summit also got no respect.

But there isn't really much to laugh at, for the Summit is a pale version of his over-the-top resort designs. The wavy aqua-colored brick facade on the side street is only slightly amusing, and the lobby is long gone. It has the drama of a roadside historical marker.

The name Hotel Alley is of recent origin. In the archives of The New York Times and on Google, the earliest usage is a September 2002 article in Real Estate Weekly quoting Joseph Aquino, a retail leasing broker at Prudential Douglas Elliman.

Mr. Aquino does not recall the etymology, or even if he coined it.

"It was probably part of a press release that I dictated to my publicist," he said.

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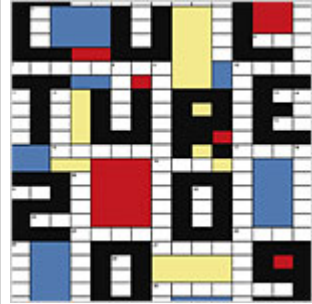
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