

BUILDING BLOCKS

Behind Subway's Phantom Hotel Entrance, Neither Arias Nor Opulence Linger

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

The management of the Astor family's Hotel Knickerbocker was baffled.

Only days after its opening on Oct. 24, 1906, the 15-story hotel at Broadway and West 42nd Street was already bursting at its Beaux-Arts seams. Two-thirds of its rooms were occupied. Diners were being turned away from its restaurants.

"Where do all the people come from?" the managers asked.

The answer was right under their noses. Actually, it was under their feet.

Among its innovative features, the Knickerbocker had been built with a direct entrance from the downtown platform of the Interborough Rapid Transit subway line. You couldn't miss the door into the hotel, with its bold lintel proclaiming "Knickerbocker" in capital letters.

And evidently, no one did miss it. "There is a constant stream of strangers through the lower floors of the hotel," The New York Times reported. "They have to go see the heralded splendor of this newest Times Square building. The women even peek in at the barroom to see Parrish's picture of Old King Cole."

The corridor leading to the subway platform was "furnished with settees and decorated with heraldic banners," The Times said.

This passageway has come to light again with the renovation of the Knickerbocker as a luxury hotel, after more than 90 years as an office building. Details about the new hotel, which is to open this fall, were reported Tuesday in The New York Post.

In recent months, workers have been repairing copper ornaments on the building's elaborate mansard roof. The exterior of the Knickerbocker is an officially designated landmark.

The original hotel closed in 1920. In the 1930s, the Maxfield Parrish mural was moved to another Astor hotel, the St. Regis, at Fifth Avenue and East 55th Street, to become the centerpiece of the King Cole Bar. Office tenants in the Knickerbocker building over the years included Newsweek magazine, which was also once an Astor holding.

As the subway grew, the original Times Square station was turned into a terminus for the shuttle to and from Grand Central. The downtown platform was re-designated Track 1, the uptown platform Track 4.

The "Knickerbocker" door remained, however, sealed tight, hiding one of the city's great mysteries. What was on the other side?

Now we know: the very corridor described by The Times 108 years ago.

Its architectural features are shat-



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The old entrance to the Hotel Knickerbocker can still be seen from a platform in the Times Square subway station.



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The Knickerbocker, shown at left between 1900 and 1910. Today, the area beyond the door is used for storage, right.

tered, punctured, flaking, spalling and crumbling. The heraldic banners and settees are, of course, long gone. Only an apocalyptic film director or an incurable romantic would be drawn to this space,

which is used for storage.

Yet it has survived.

Handsome circular ornaments called roundels still punctuate some of the plasterwork on the columns. A few surfaces

retain the elaborate foliate patterns with which they were stenciled when Theodore Roosevelt was president.

More stenciling, in an Art Nouveau pattern, can be discerned on the better-

preserved roundels. (None are well preserved, but some are less ruined than others.) Apparently, the roundels were painted carmine or maroon, while the columns were a mint color or pine green. The stenciling seems to have been in gold.

In one corner of the space is a bricked-up entrance that corresponds with the "Knickerbocker" door on the platform, said Pasquale Botta, the director of engineering for the building.

There are no plans to reopen it, said Jeff David, the managing director of the hotel.

Even in its day, the subway entrance was not for everyone.

For instance, after escaping from a nearby theater, an 11-year-old chimpanzee named Prince Charles strolled into

A passageway once appointed with settees and heraldic banners.

the hotel lobby on Feb. 17, 1918. Despite the fact that he was fully dressed, the police were summoned.

"Ape in Big Broadway Hotel," the headline in The Times said the next day. "Scares Women as He Wanders Into the Knickerbocker Lobby."

On Dec. 23, 1919, two jewel thieves were making their way out of the hotel along a third-floor ledge until police officers on the street took notice and fired warning shots. The criminals burst into a guest room, then made their way to the basement by sliding down the elevator cables. In the grill room, they loaded up on Tabasco sauce.

When they were cornered by four patrolmen, the intruders tried to blind the police officers by squirting them with the makeshift pepper spray. "Result: ambulances," The Times said. "Surgeons sewed up the burglars."

Enrico Caruso, the most celebrated of the Knickerbocker's permanent residents, was in his seventh-floor suite while the drama played out downstairs. "He slept through all the commotion," The Times said.

For sheer nonchalance, however, there was no beating Patrolman Charles Frayler, who had fired the first warning shots.

"They certainly had some nerve trying to fight a squad of New York cops with Tabasco sauce," he said. "Why, that's the stuff we eat on oysters."