

BBQ

From Frayed to Fabulous
The Social Room

BY PAULA CHIN

When Michael Ritchken threw himself a 50th birthday bash two years ago, he decided to stick close to home. The board president at the 18-story Trump Place condo at 120 Riverside Boulevard on the Upper West Side rented the building's rooftop Oasis Lounge. It had just undergone a makeover, morphing from frumpy to fabulous.

"It's elegant and it's comfortable," he says. "I had 45 guests and everybody could spread around, mingle, and enjoy the spectacular view of the Hudson River. It almost feels like you're on a luxury cruise."

The 276-unit Trump building is just one in a new wave of properties joining the "Social Room" boom. These au courant gathering spots are typically outfitted with large screen TVs, wireless access, upgraded kitchens, and comfy, intimate seating for lounging, reading, or smaller

AFTER

BEFORE



PHOTOS BY DANIELLE FINKELSTEIN

A GRAND VISION: Michael Ritchken (inset), board president of Trump Place, in the building's recently renovated social room.



A "REFRESH" WAS NEEDED: Trump Place redesign.



get-togethers – think of them as the contemporary version of their no-frills cousin, the community room. New condos have social rooms, and many large co-op complexes do too. And now boards in older buildings are stepping up their game, dipping into their operating funds, and installing or refurbishing them.

Staying Competitive

What's behind the trend? "New construction offers a lot of amenities, whether it's doggie day care or golf simulators, so social rooms are one way for existing buildings to stay competitive when it comes to buyers," says Marilyn Sygrove, president of Sygrove Associates Design Group, which handled the Trump project. "It also ups the market value for every tenant – a minimum of 10 percent, real estate brokers tell me. In essence, it adds square footage to every unit. And there's the 'wow' factor. A well-done social room is a sales tool that enhances a building's image."

The 120 Riverside condo was built in 2004, but the original lounge –

which resembled more drab office lobby than an oasis – was already showing its age. "The furniture was worn, the carpeting was frayed, and the wallpaper was scuffed," says Ritchken. "Both the board and the residents felt a refresh was overdue." The board created a subcommittee comprised of Ritchken, the vice president, and managing agent Michael Basile of Akam Associates, who recruited Sygrove. "Our firm specializes in lobby, hallway, and common area installations at cooperatives and condominiums, and we had worked with [Basile] before at other properties," Sygrove says.

Since the building has a room for billiards and one for children, the board wanted a quiet, adults-only space that could also be used for private events and parties. "Sygrove came up with recommendations, and we presented

them to owners by putting up a 'mood board' with the suggested fabrics, carpeting, and wood samples in the lobby," says Ritchken. "Then we had a coffee-and-bagels meeting where everyone could tell us what they thought. We took their feedback, refined the selections, and presented the plan to the full board. Once we got their blessing, we gave it to Sygrove to execute. It was a swift, smooth process."

Sygrove perked up the 66- by 20-foot area with modern chandeliers and sconces and replaced the built-in banquettes with designer Tulip sofas and chairs, which can be moved to make room for tables and chairs for sit-down dinners. "The fabrics, carpeting, and wall covering are durable and forgiving – they hide dirt and are easy to clean – but everything looks and feels light, airy, and definitely upbeat," says Sygrove. Thanks to the \$100,000 redesign, which was paid with operating funds derived from common charges (as well as insurance proceeds for damage to the roof caused by a hurricane), the social room has become the crown jewel of 120 Riverside. "When people walk in for the first time they're amazed," says Ritchken. "Everybody loves it, and it gets very well used."

Old Room, New Tricks

In older buildings, existing social

rooms sometimes require more of an overhaul. Case in point: the Churchill on East 40th Street. Built in 1967, the 586-unit co-op has been fully restored in recent years, including the rooftop lounge on the 33rd floor. "It overlooks the East River and has beautiful views, but it was a very plain space," says Joel M. Ergas, president of Forbes-Ergas Design Associates, which redesigned the lounge. "The board didn't want anything slick or trendy. The building has a big cross-section of residents, so they wanted a contemporary but classic room where people could come up and read and students could study – but something that could also be reserved for meetings and parties."

So Ergas focused on creating a clean-looking, multifunctional space. One side of the 1,110-square foot room is a large seating area with library shelves, Wi-Fi, a large-screen TV, sofa, and chairs, plus faux-leather benches in the window bays for more casual seating. On the other side are tables and chairs, all on casters so they can be easily rearranged or stowed in the room's walk-in closets. The kitchen was upgraded to make food preparation and service easier. Ergas removed cabinets to create open, restaurant-style shelves and installed a full-sized refrigerator, a microwave, and a gas stove. He also created a pass-through window to the long, open counter, as well as a higher unit next to it that can function as a bar.

"As a nod to the budget, we couldn't rip out the ceiling, but we did add LED light sources and fixtures, all of them on separate circuits so you can play around," Ergas says. As for controlling natural light, the east-facing windows were outfitted with UV-filtered glass and drop-down solar shades, and the floor-to-ceiling southern-exposure windows were draped with sheer, silver-blue casement curtains. "Everything was



DESIGNED FOR FLEXIBILITY: Lounge renovation at the Churchill.



designed for flexibility," Ergas says. "That, and bringing the room into the 21st century."

Carving Out Space

Other co-ops are carving out whole new spaces to keep up with the social room phenomenon. Sygrove did just that at the Bel-Air, a 244-unit co-op on Yellowstone Boulevard in Forest Hills, Queens.

"This is a World's Fair-style tower that was built in 1962 [when the upcoming 1964 World's Fair in Queens was in the news], and there was a large, mostly empty lobby that the board felt was a waste of space, so we created a social room by designing sliding glass doors to partition off a section in the back," Sygrove says. The lounge is small – just 440 square feet – and simply furnished with a large sectional sofa and two freestanding tables and chairs. "The idea is that they can be pushed together for board meetings," she says. "And there's a provision for a large TV screen to make it more of a community room for residents."

Whether it's a simple refurbish or a structural revamp, Sygrove adds, the biggest challenge when doing social rooms is often the building's board. "They know they



want them, but they don't always know exactly *what* they want them to be," she says. "Sometimes they ask us and we suggest they survey the residents. Sometimes we make recommendations based on demographics, like libraries for older residents, or tables for tutoring kids. The good thing is that you see more of a group mentality on boards these days. The members have similar backgrounds and common goals, which makes our job easier."

Not to be left out, lower- and middle-income properties are also embracing the trend. Dawn Dickstein, president of MD² Property Group, managed a 500-unit co-op in Riverdale in the Bronx that converted a 1,500-square foot carpentry workshop into a multipurpose community room. "It was a complete gut renovation," she says. "No, it doesn't have a big screen TV or pool table; it's unfurnished, with folding chairs and long tables. But it's a bright and airy space that didn't exist before, and it serves its residents."

The board holds its monthly meetings and conducts admission interviews there. The room is also available for rental for children's birthday parties, and every day, from 1 to 5 P.M., senior citizens come to play cards and socialize – at no charge. "Yes, the co-op is generating revenue by renting it out, but that's not the goal," Dickstein says. "I'd venture to say it will be at least 10 years before the building recoups its costs. The aim was to foster a sense of community, and it's what they're doing. It's a benefit you can't measure in dollars." ■



A REBIRTH IN QUEENS: Renovation at the Bel-Air.

