

GREATER NEW YORK

Developers Dust Off Architect's Legacy Again

Ralph Walker largely had been forgotten until his name was resurrected as a branding tool to lure 21st-century tenants

By JOSH BARBANEL

When the Walker Tower in Manhattan was converted to luxury condos a few years ago, the developers celebrated the building's designer, Ralph Walker, who once was heralded as the "Architect of the Century" but had faded from history.

The developers commissioned a book on his life and an exhibit of his work for the building's lobby. The marketing campaign proved wildly successful.

An apartment at the building on West 18th Street sold for \$50.9 million in 2014 and for four years held the record as the most expensive downtown condo sale.

Now, Mr. Walker's name is being summoned again, this time for a more modest proposition: A mix of market-rate and affordable apartments on the edge of downtown Newark.

At Walker House, studios start at \$1,875 a month.

"We are cognizant of how the Walker name was used by developers in the city," said Jonathan Cortell, a vice president at L+M Development Partners Inc., who is overseeing the Newark project. "It connects us to product in New York that has preceded us."

Walker House on Broad Street in Newark, like Walker Tower and Stella Tower, a Manhattan condo conversion named after Mr. Walker's wife, was designed by Mr. Walker for local telephone companies in the 1920s at a time when they were rapidly expanding and looking to make a bold statement through architecture.

A 20-story tower, the Walker House was built as the headquarters for New Jersey Bell Telephone and until recently the Verizon New Jersey headquarters building.

While Verizon will maintain a presence in the building, most of the space has been divided into 264 apartments, with 20% set aside for affordable housing, commercial space, as well as ground-floor retail.

Sen. Cory Booker, a New

Jersey Democrat who once was the mayor of Newark, has leased space there for his 2020 presidential campaign headquarters.

Other tenants include a brewery, a rock-climbing gym and Per Scholas, a not-for-profit tech-training program.

Mr. Walker, known for his graceful, step-like art deco towers with their lavish details in stone and metalwork, received the centennial medal of honor from the American Institute of Architects in 1957, an award it said would be offered every 100 years.

But then Mr. Walker's work was largely forgotten. He feuded bitterly with masters of modern architecture and resigned in protest from the AIA—later destroying his centennial medal—after his firm was accused of ethical lapses. He died by suicide in 1973.

Richard Pandiscio, a branding and marketing consultant on the project at the Walker Tower in Manhattan, is a fan of art deco and suggested that Mr. Walker's name could add value to the project. The team commissioned the book about his life and devoted the exhibit to the architect.

The developers—Property Markets Group and JDS Development Group—paid \$25.25 million in 2009 for the upper floors of the tower, according to property records.

However, after a series of price increases, they listed the total sellout price of 47 condo units at more than \$540 million in the offering-plan documents.

Michael Stern, founder of JDS, said the goal was to keep people from referring to the condos as "the Verizon building."

"In the end we did an A+ building on an A- block, and we got A+ prices," he said.

The brick and sandstone Newark building is decorated with floral designs, and its fourth floor features large figures of a telephone lineman, customers, an operator and a repairman.

The lobby is adorned



New Jersey Bell Telephone Co., Newark, N. J.
Architects, Voorhees, Gmelin & Walker.

Size, 221' x 141' in plan, 20 stories with two basements.

The Bell Telephone Building, top left, was constructed in the 1920s in Newark. An original art deco mural of the Roman god Mercury decorates the lobby of the building at 540 Broad St. Below, the structure is being transformed into apartments and commercial space.



FROM LEFT: TURNER, MARK KAULZARICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (2)


with marble, bronze grillwork and a large mural of a man holding a telephone handset and cables encircling a globe.

Leasing at Walker House is set to begin on May 1 for occupancy by June 1, a spokesman for the project said. One-bedroom apartments start at \$2,285 a month, and two-bedroom units start at \$2,750.

The development—by L+M, Prudential Financial Inc. and Goldman Sachs Urban Investment Group—is part of a broader effort to transform downtown Newark into a lively 24-hour neighborhood.

The same team was involved in converting the nearby Hahne & Co. department store into a mixed-use development, including rental apartments, community space and a commercial hall with a glass atrium. Whole Foods opened its first Newark location there.



 GOD'S LOVE WE DELIVER.