

# THE Legacy Stewards

AT THE MASTER  
APARTMENTS

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PHOTOS BY JENNIFER WU

**M**onty Freeman, an architect, had just begun a renovation at the Master Apartments, a 28-story Art Deco gem at 310 Riverside Drive and 103rd Street, when his client told him about a derelict penthouse in the co-op that was in bank foreclosure. The place was a wreck, but when he stepped out onto the terrace, he was smitten. “I thought, “Oh, I could live

here!”” recalls Freeman, who soon bought a one-bedroom on the 22nd floor, which he later merged with the studio next door. “I fell in love with the architecture and bohemian ambiance of the place. It was the best move I ever made.”

Freeman joined the co-op board about eight years ago, and as he and his fellow directors know firsthand, with architectural grandeur comes great responsibility.

Maintaining an older building is a never-ending challenge, but at the Master, which dates to 1929 and was designated a New York City landmark in 1966, the task is even more daunting. It’s not just about bricks and mortar, but also about preserving its architectural integrity – and in this case, its spirit. The Master was originally an apartment hotel atop a cultural center and museum.





IN THE BEGINNING:  
Kathy Ralph and  
Monty Freeman  
with a sign from the  
Master Apartments'  
early days.





Board president Wendy Balter (left) outside the Master Apartments.



“This is a building that has creative arts as its very soul – writers, dancers, filmmakers, and theater people,” Freeman says. “It’s our charge to be stewards of its legacy.”

Thanks to prudent steps the board has taken to maintain the Master’s beauty and integrity, it is aging gracefully. The board established a building committee that works in tandem with a finance committee to initiate repairs and renovations and come up with a multi-year plan and budget – a job that is a form of triage. “We have to prioritize what would be nice architecture-wise, and what’s urgent and essential,” Freeman explains.

Most recently, prosaic plumbing maintenance has been at the top of the must-do list. “It’s the bane of our existence,” says Wendy Balter, the board president. While the Master has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars replacing pipes and installing flow-control valves, it’s still an ongoing process. In addition, the

two boilers will need to be replaced. The building’s four elevators were replaced in 2018 for about \$1 million. Facade work and weatherproofing are other constant issues, since the building, which is perched above the Hudson, is blasted by rain and river winds, making it vulnerable to water penetration. Repairing the exterior, which has elaborate brickwork in six varying colors, requires finding the right shades that are up to the standards of historical preservationists.

Fortunately, the board has done its math when it comes to financing. Each year the board votes on an extra maintenance fee for capital improvements. In addition, the building, which was converted to a co-op in 1988, took out a large mortgage when interest rates were low, which has helped keep reserves healthy.

Smart spending is also part of the plan. “We’re very careful with expenditures,” explains Balter, a Columbia University business school graduate who is now president of a medical communications company. “We always get triple bids on any project over \$5,000, and if it still

costs more than we thought, we will try another approach. It takes time and effort, but with more information, you get better value.”

As a result, there have been no assessments and only modest maintenance hikes of no more than 5 percent a year. “Like most older Upper West Side conversions, a lot of people who bought in are now on fixed incomes,” says Balter. “We’re always trying not to spring any financial surprises that would be a hardship for them and instead do predictable, steady increases, which we explain to shareholders at annual meetings and through our board minutes. I think people appreciate it.”

Don Skupinsky, vice president at Orsid Realty, who manages the property, certainly does. “The board members are really good listeners,





The lobby doubles as an art gallery.

and residents know they share their concerns,” he says. “At the same time, they’re always looking to rectify issues. What can be done today to make the building better tomorrow, they do, especially when it comes to preventive maintenance. That’s worth its weight in gold.”

## A Priceless Asset

The Master’s rich artistic heritage is, of course, priceless. The building’s architect, Harvey Wiley Corbett, envisioned it as a place “where art and human beings will grow and develop side by side,” and in recent years the board has focused on remaining true to that original mission. In 2012, Kathy Ralph, a former board member, began the “Monday Night at the Master” program, which features presentations and readings from an eclectic roster of residents, including historians, authors, and archaeologists who have talked about everything from the civil rights movement to George Gershwin, who lived right across 103rd Street. The popular events are held in the side lobby, where a grand staircase doubles as a “chaircase” for overflow crowds. “People are thrilled to learn about their neighbors and what they’re doing,” Ralph has said. “And with wine and cheese, it’s also a chance to socialize.”

Two years later, two shareholders, Jan Fort and Michael Alicia, inaugurated a rotating art show in the capacious main lobby, inspired by the building’s most storied early resident, Nicholas Roerich, a Russian philosopher and painter, the “master” who

gave the building its name. His artwork was shown in a second-floor museum.

“Roerich’s mission was to share art and keep culture alive, which is what we’re doing,” explains Fort, a food stylist who has lived in the Master since 1985. The board spent \$10,000 for a sophisticated system for picture hanging and gallery-quality lighting, which has greatly improved the ambiance in the whole lobby. Four artists are featured every year – not just residents, but also people in the neighborhood or those who have a connection to the building.

“It’s a testament to the thriving art community around us, and it’s open to all,” says Fort. “We want it to be that quiet little find for people who are strolling through Riverside Park.”

A new lobby exhibit is now in the works – a permanent panel of photographs and text chronicling the Master’s history. It will be unveiled in October to celebrate the building’s 90th anniversary. Mildred Speiser, who has lived at the Master for more than half a century, came up with that idea last fall at the meet-the-candidate night before the co-op’s annual meeting. “Mildred is the collective memory of the building,” says Randy Turner, a board member and a former national park ranger who is putting together the display. “We had some archives, but Mildred had a lot more material, including photos of the 1929 dedication and programs from museum exhibits.” Turner worked with Freeman, the architect and fellow board member, to

get the Master’s National Register of Historic Places listing in 2016.

## The Holy Grail

In the meantime, the board is poring over its wish list. Having restored the grand lobby, remodeled the hallways and improved the bike, storage and laundry rooms, the board is planning repairs to the deteriorating steel on the canopy and vestibule of the Riverside Drive entry. Rusted steel framing on the decorative stained glass atop both entries needs to be scraped and reinforced, and the outer layers of the building’s granite cornerstone are cracking. This fall, the sidewalk in front of the residential entrance to the former theater on 103rd Street will be made handicapped-accessible. (It currently has a temporary metal ramp.)

Then there’s the restoration of the imposing, 25-foot ziggurat-shaped stupa on top of the building, which, along with the Deco detailing and terraced setbacks, make the majestic Master instantly recognizable from Riverside Drive and the Henry Hudson Parkway. Originally clad in light-colored metal, it was covered with black tar and asphalt to make it less visible during World War II.

“It’s leaking and unstable, and needs to be secured before a storm blows it down,” says Freeman. “Improving the aesthetics, returning it to its original appearance, and installing lighting underneath is our dream. It’s the Holy Grail.”

By paying attention to projects both large and small, board members at the Master are turning its history and architectural flourishes into added value for all residents. That attention to detail includes painting the grand lobby in Deco-style pastel shades, preserving the terrazzo floors instead of installing rugs, and emblazoning staff uniforms with a distinctive logo. “They’ve paid attention to subtle details that add to the building’s integrity and character,” says Turner. “People are proud to live at the Master.” ■