

Dimes Square Gets the Hotel It Deserves

Nine Orchard is a boutique destination for a neighborhood that isn't sure it's a neighborhood.



By Marisa Meltzer

“I won’t tell you the molding story, but there’s a lot to the molding,” Andrew Rifkin said, standing inside a room in Nine Orchard, the new hotel on Canal Street between Orchard and Allen Streets. Mr. Rifkin is also proud of the custom ceramic toilet paper holders (“You need a place to put your iPhone while you’re in the toilet”), the round tables in rooms “wherever we can fit them — they’re hospitable”) and the apples and Saratoga Water that greet guests.

It was not always so fancy. Mr. Rifkin, 63, is the managing partner at DLJ Real Estate Capital Partners, which bought the landmark status Beaux-Arts 1912 Jarmulowsky Bank Building along with the building next door (which they tore down) for \$41 million a decade ago. “It was a complete wreck,” he said of the building, which was originally designed by the architects Rouse & Goldstone.

Neighborhood gossip speculated that the 12-story building, long in disrepair, was set to become an Ace Hotel. “It was going to be a lot of things— an apartment building, an office building,” Mr. Rifkin said. “Finally we landed on a hotel as we watched the neighborhood evolve.”

Neighborhood “evolution” has been central to the story of Nine Orchard, which occupies a central position in the intersection of the Lower East Side and Chinatown neighborhoods once jokingly (and now semi-seriously) known as Dimes Square. The area has become a bustling playground known for a few good bars and restaurants and galleries with young clientele that straddles the worlds of media, fashion, skateboarding, art and every other vaunted downtown Manhattan pursuit.

In the last few months, there has been an eruption of new businesses, including Le Dive, a French-brasserie-inspired bar and cafe on Ludlow Street, owned by Golden Age Hospitality; the wine shop Parcelle’s new wine bar on Division Street; and the expansion of the chef Flynn McGarry’s restaurant Gem into a wine bar on Broome Street.

Nine Orchard is the splashiest addition yet to the neighborhood, which was already the subject of a play called “Dimes Square” and think pieces in *Vanity Fair* (“What Was Dimes Square?”) and *The Baffler* (“Escape From Dimes Square”).

If Mr. Rifkin, who was wearing navy shorts, a blue short-sleeve shirt and desert boots on a hot afternoon at the end of June, was giving a particularly close read to any of it, he remained somewhat tight-lipped on the subject of gentrification.

“The shops here are so tiny I don’t think national retail chains will be interested,” he said as two tourists speaking Italian and carrying a paperback guide to the city walked by. “Look, there is a very embedded base of people who live here. When I speak to neighbors, they are welcoming and happy to have something different.”

Mr. Rifkin has certainly done neighborhood outreach. Emily Adams Bode Aujla and her husband, Aaron Aujla (she of the fashion brand Bode and he of the interiors studio Green River Project), have been to breakfast; Mr. McGarry of Gem has spent the night; and Daniella Kallmeyer, a designer whose boutique is on Orchard Street, has had dinner in a private dining room.

Nine Orchard has included neighborhood businesses, including Mel, a bakery on Division Street, for the cookies served at turndown service; plants from Cactus Store on Essex Street; in-room snacks from Dimes Market; and assorted used books (“The Feminist Companion to Literature in English,” Dennis Rodman’s memoir) from Sweet Pickle Books on Orchard Street.

Mr. Rifkin also commissioned a book, “At the Corner of Canal and Orchard,” tracing the history of the building beginning with Sender Jarmulowsky, an immigrant born in Poland in 1841 who made his money selling discount steerage tickets on boats coming to America from Eastern Europe and later founded the bank the hotel now occupies. There is a copy in every room, along with postcards by the artist Leanne Shapton depicting the hotel in each season.

Mr. Rifkin noted that this neighborhood was where his grandparents landed in America. He grew up in Brooklyn, lived on the Upper East Side for many years and now resides in SoHo.

He was standing on the roof gesturing toward the rebuilt 60-foot cupola ringed with eagles that is perhaps the hotel’s most notable architectural flourish. “I think we aligned on it being a tempietto,” he said. (A tempietto has columns.) “But when was the last time someone built one in New York?” In 1991, after the original was removed, an article in The New York Times said that “the area’s skyline lost one of its signature elements.”

Now Mr. Rifkin imagines someone booking a dinner for 12 under the dome: “How great would that be?”

There is a small bar still being built on the roof for events. It’s meant to feel like being in a greenhouse with a trellis on the ceiling and a bamboo bar.

“We have a roof and I’m dreaming,” said Ignacio Mattos, who is in charge of food and beverage services at Nine Orchard. “Maybe a proper jazz bar with that view?”

Mr. Mattos, who owns the popular restaurants Estela and Altro Paradiso, and is a co-owner of Lodi, had been approached to lend his services to a hotel but had always declined. “It was not the right alignment,” he said as he sat at a table at Corner Bar, the first restaurant at Nine Orchard to open.

It’s a casual restaurant, or as casual as a restaurant can be that offers a plateau de fruits de mer that can go for \$75 to \$160. “When Andy approached me it made sense,” Mr. Mattos said. “When somebody has that obsession and drive and determination to make it work after 10 years, it’s what I value most as a human.”

Until recently, Mr. Mattos lived just down the street and had an idea of what he loved to eat in the neighborhood and what he could bring. “I didn’t want to compete with anybody here,” he said. “I just wanted to be an addition to the neighborhood.”

Next door to Corner Bar, there will be a fine dining restaurant, Amado Grill, with a tasting menu. It will open this fall. He likens it to the kind of elegance one might have to travel to Midtown or Upper East Side restaurants to find.

Mr. Mattos is also running room service for the hotel. “I have to make sure the fries are crispy and hot,” he said with a laugh. “There is beauty in the most ordinary things, and I’m figuring out a way to elevate it.”

Mr. Rifkin’s idea for the hotel was somewhere parents may be comfortable staying. “Many places are being built with focused targets, and if you’re a little older, you might not be comfortable there,” he said of competing hotels.

The rooms, which start at \$475 per night, were inspired by residential apartments with dark wood furniture and rugs and blankets in shades of dark green and rust. One set of chairs in the lobby is covered in a thick wool bouclé. “A building like the Dakota was the inspiration,” he said. “I’m doing classic New York.” Three rooms on the seventh floor have terraces for private outdoor space.

Instead of Bluetooth speakers, there are radio channels programmed by the D.J. Stretch Armstrong and Devon Turnbull (Arthur Russell was playing in a room on the fourth floor), and instead of complicated panels for lights, there is a central pad to tap the lights on and off. “I guess I was trying to make an analog hotel,” Mr. Rifkin said.

He commissioned a large piece of art from the Colombian artist María Berrío for the walls of the Lobby Lounge. It depicts two women on a boat, looking back at their homeland.

The Lobby Lounge is an opulent cocktail bar where the lobby of the bank once stood. One of its offerings is a martini service for four to six, with a samovar-size batch of either the gin or vodka version of the cocktail and dishes of pickled onions, lemon peel, olives and a small carafe of brine. Later this summer, the bar will serve afternoon tea.

The last stop on Mr. Rifkin’s tour was a small private dining room. “This is where the bank president was, and that’s where all the tellers were,” he said, gesturing down to the Lobby Bar. “Sometimes I just sit up here.”

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