

# The New York Times

SQUARE FEET

## An Art Gallery in the Lobby



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

The lobby of 125 Maiden Lane has several shows a year, one with this piece by Sook Jin Jo, "Why Is the Horse Facing East?"

By LISA CHAMBERLAIN  
Published: March 7, 2007

Placing art in commercial buildings to enliven a lobby or courtyard is hardly a new concept. But more often than not, the art seems to be an afterthought, especially as permanent installations fade into the background with the ficus trees.

But the first Class A commercial condominium building in Lower Manhattan has taken lobby art to a new level. At 125 Maiden Lane, also known as Water Street Plaza, the lobby is used to display rotating exhibits organized by an internal curator who recruits artists and organizes openings the way it would be done in a typical gallery space. The rectangular lobby is transformed by sculpture installations, and a separate high-ceiling fountain area also serves as exhibition space.

The building has been owned since 1999 by Time Equities, a New York real estate investment company with 18.1 million square feet of property in the United States and Canada.

The founder and chairman of Time Equities, Francis J. Greenburger, established the company's Art in Buildings program in 2000. Since then it has evolved so that the company now employs a full-time curator.

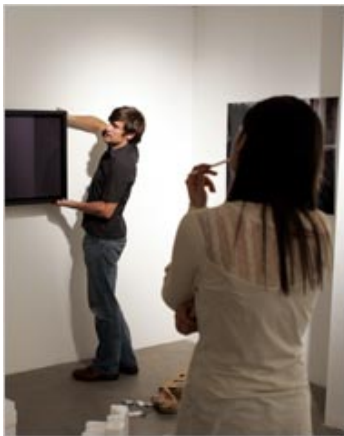
At 125 Maiden Lane, the art exhibits are becoming part of the building's identity. That has helped attract arts and culture-oriented buyers since last year, when Time Equities began converting leased space to for-sale office condos. "Since 9/11, we were nomads," said Tom Healy, president of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, which recently bought space at 125 Maiden Lane. The council, a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to promoting the arts downtown and has its own public gallery space on the second floor called Redhead, had been at the World Trade Center and lost an artist in the attack. The group moved five times in five years until finding space at 125 Maiden Lane. It moved in with the knowledge that not only did the landlord, Time Equities, have a commitment to art, but that the Cultural Council would be able to buy its space when the building went condo.

"For an arts organization, owning your own space is like having an endowment," Mr. Healy said. "The space has already appreciated in just the few months since we closed the deal."

The building has sold 200,000 square feet out of 350,000 total. Other tenants include the Empire State Development Corporation and the Civil Service

Employees Association. Tenants who have already bought space paid about \$380 a square foot, but with the New York office market exceptionally strong, the current price is closer to \$450 a square foot, Mr. Greenburger said.

“We’re negotiating with two buyers right now, and art is important to them,” said Mr. Greenburger, who also underwrites the \$10,000 Greenburger awards given every two years to five under-recognized artists. “One is himself an important artist who needs an office for his foundation. The other is a not-for-profit that is involved with, among other things, cultural issues.”



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

In the same building, an exhibit goes up at the office of the Lower Manhattan Culture Council.

The Art in Buildings program evolved from Mr. Greenburger’s private collection, which he lent out for display in the company’s properties, and his association with the Omi International Arts Center in Ghent, New York. Through that group, he met Elisabeth Akkerman, who had curated art exhibits in commercial buildings in Germany before coming to Time Equities in 2003.

Ms. Akkerman rotates exhibits in the lobby at 125 Maiden Lane four times a year and oversees temporary and permanent exhibits in other Time Equities buildings in New York and across the country, including the company’s headquarters at 55 Fifth Avenue. The lobby there is showing the “Antarctica Project,” a video performance installation by the Argentine artist Andrea Juan.

Other buildings around Manhattan have curated art exhibits, but they are almost always installed by outside organizations rather than handled by the landlord.

One such art gallery is in the UBS building at 1285 Avenue of the Americas. The 4,000-square-foot gallery, previously run by PaineWebber before it merged with UBS, has existed since 1985. The exhibits are organized by nonprofit groups working with the director of the gallery space, Colin Thomson, who sees advantages to placing art in nontraditional places.

“There’s an audience here that’s not necessarily going to go to a museum,” Mr. Thomson said. “And unlike a museum exhibition, where you come in, see the show and leave, this is a situation where you come in every day and see it more than once. People really have time to live with something and see the exhibit from different angles.”

Rotating exhibits in large gallery spaces owned by commercial landlords, however, are relatively rare. More common are permanent installations in lobbies overseen by an outside curatorial service, like Art Assets, founded by Barbara Koz Paley in 1992.

The typical arrangement for Art Assets is a three-year lease at 5 cents a square foot a year for turnkey service, an all-inclusive package. So, for example, a 500,000-square-foot building would pay \$25,000 a year for original art without having to buy it, install it or insure for it.

Ms. Paley employs two curators who work directly with artists, some of whom create art for specific sites. At 750 Third Avenue, for example, the Swiss artist Markus Wetzel has installed a continuous 30-foot photograph over the concierge desk in the lobby.

“Lobbies are more interesting than the white-box gallery,” Ms. Paley said. “They have a personality and pose challenges. And it’s not just about circulating art; it’s about a societal trend. We want prettier spaces, and we want landlords to take care of those spaces. People have come to expect it.”

Encountering the unexpected, however, is the point of rotating art exhibits in commercial spaces, Ms. Akkerman said. “People see the artist doing the installation and want to stop and talk with the artist,” she said. “It becomes very

personal, which is something that artists aren't always used to. On the opening night, the artist and people from the art world come, and tenants get to meet each other. It's very sociable."

The attention from the art world has been a pleasant surprise for Ms. Akkerman. At Maiden Lane, Tadashi Hashimoto's "Myriad of Views" was reviewed by the international art critic Robert C. Morgan in the art magazine *Sculpture*, and Matthew Geller's video installation "Almost. Again. Almost. One more time," was reviewed in Artnet.

"At first, I had to recruit artists to show here," Ms. Akkerman said, "but now they are contacting me. They like the challenge of the space and respond to it with their ideas in unique ways."