

MULTI-HOUSING NEWS

Kratchman Designs Interior Renovation of Noted Student Housing Complex

By Matthew Marin, Associate Editor

JANUARY 10, 2007 – New York—A thorough understanding of the relationship of a facility's mission statement to its physical function inspired the blueprint for the \$8-million interior design renovation of the International House, a well-known student housing complex in Manhattan, by New York-based Steven Kratchman Architect PC.

The purpose of the 10-story, H-shaped International House is to provide a supportive residential community for graduate students and interns from more than 100 countries, in an attempt to build friendships among individuals from diverse backgrounds. Built in 1924, the complex is located in the Morningside Heights neighborhood, at 500 Riverside Drive near 122nd Street. Situated near Columbia University, the property overlooks Sakura Park, which has a collection of Japanese Cherry Trees.

"International House is the most culturally diverse community located within the most culturally diverse city in the world," said Steven Kratchman, AIA, founder and CEO of the firm. "International House was intended to be a large house and program center. Day and night, it is [the students'] shared house. And, at the same time, it is each individual's own home."

The International House was intended to enhance students' social interactions in the communal rooms. The private bedrooms were designed to be small, and the bathrooms were shared. The interior renovation, which was completed in March of 2006, involved 503 bedrooms, 10 corridors, elevator lobbies, 20 shared bathrooms, and 20 new lounges, 650 replacement windows were installed, fans, lighting and fire alarm upgrades; and new furniture was added.

"One unique facilities challenge we encountered was to identify the role of the existing student lounges," said Kratchman. "Our research revealed that, historically, the lounges didn't exist in the original design and that their current uses were being duplicated elsewhere throughout the building."

Based on the firm's review, it reconfigured 20 lounges and replaced their doors to decrease noise. Kratchman Architects added scaled furniture, fresh window treatments, ceilings, lighting, flooring and a small pantry. Some lounges were converted to accommodate recycling and other utility needs.

The firm also fine-tuned the architecture of the individual bedrooms by designing built-in bookshelves to take advantage of the wall area. Under each bed, additional storage and a space for a personal refrigerator was provided. To reduce noise and conceal wiring, dropped ceilings were included. "We also removed the old room doors that had open metal grills that admitted far too much sound, and replaced them with solid doors that also have an acoustic seal," Kratchman noted.

In addition to creating a cutting-edge design for the bedrooms and corridors, Kratchman Architects implemented environmentally friendly practices in its blueprint. The carpets and paints are produced from low volatile organic compound (VOC) materials. The window shades are made from bamboo. The furniture is recycled. The firm utilized the benefits of low-energy consumption lighting and high-efficiency electric fans, replacing the use of air conditioning.

To draw inspiration for the redesign of the bedrooms, the design team visited and studied the design of several New York City boutique hotels, including the Hudson Hotel, the Flatotel and the W Hotel. Instead of using institutional housing as a design model, Kratchman Architects implemented upscale design elements, such as glass accent tiles and rich wood doorframes. The firm selected synthetic-stone, solid-surface counter tops along with stylish, non-standard overmount sinks (pictured below).



The Kratchman team also developed elevator hall and lobby designs with new floors and ceilings, lighting, new metal doors and card-key locking systems, wainscot treatments with rich wood tones and a large numeral identity graphic of highly textured plexiglas for each of the 10 elevator lobby landings. This backdrop becomes a lighter color on each progressively higher floor. Bathroom designs call for new hands-free fixtures, mechanical exhaust, lighting and floor and wall surfaces.

Kratchman, who had served as senior project designer for the urban redevelopment team that transformed an abandoned Manhattan harbor area into the Chelsea Piers waterfront complex, said that renovating a historic student housing facility is the "polar opposite of the trend of building new developments. Not many institutions can afford to build new buildings. This renovation is innovative and sets a new precedent."

International House was conceived by the late YMCA official Harry Edmonds following a chance encounter with a lonely Chinese graduate student at Columbia University in 1909. The philanthropy of John D. Rockefeller Jr. and the Cleveland H. Dodge family led to the construction of the building. The home's alumni includes accomplished figures, such as heads of state Nnamdi Azikwe, for Nigeria, and Benjamin Mkapa, for Tanzania as well as Nobel Prize winners Wassily Leontief, for economics, and Aage Niels Bohr and Carlo Rubbia, both for physics.

