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## A new calling: NY Telephone building in Brooklyn transforms into Belltel Lofts

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LOMBARD/NEWS

It was built in 1929 as the Long Island headquarters of the New York Telephone Company. Back then, Brooklyn had about 446,000 telephones, growing at a rate of 28,000 per year.

The 27-story red-beige brick structure with changing patterns toward the top was a monument to the coming age of telephone communication. The building, at Bridge and Willoughby Streets, straddling what is now Metro Tech near Flatbush Ave., was considered Brooklyn's first skyscraper.



*The exterior of the building (l.) and a plaque that commemorates the 2004 landmark status (r.) (News/Belltel)*

An Art Deco masterpiece, it was designed by Ralph Walker, voted architect of the century by the American Institute of Architects in 1957 for his contribution to modern design. The building had two elevator banks holding 12 lifts. Marble and hand-sculpted metalwork adorned the entrance.

Setbacks as the building rose in height gave the illusion of towers sprouting in the air. It cost over \$5.5 million to build. The building was voted a landmark in 2004, though the plaque outside should be bigger. Today, over 130 live there. It's called Belltel Lofts, and its completion defines "adaptive reuse," an architecture term referring to the redesign of historic structures to fit current needs after a building's initial purpose has become outdated.

Owned by Clipper Equity, Belltel has flown under the radar as one of the borough's most fair-priced, solidly built new developments. As a historic conversion, it deserves national recognition. The reason for that might be the developer's commitment to historic preservation, and the architects he hired to quarterback the restoration. New York-based Beyer Blinder Belle (BBB), which restored Grand Central Terminal and are behind the Domino Sugar Factory renovation in Williamsburg, are known throughout the United States as tops in the adaptive reuse category.

"When you have something this special, you have to do the right thing with it," says David Bistricher, president of Clipper Equity, a family-run organization not afraid to take on large apartment complexes.



*Above, a kitchen living room area in the model penthouse designed by Melanie Feinbloom. (Belltel)*

“This building is one of the most important structures in Brooklyn. We were one of the earliest in downtown with this project, and I knew how we did could really impact the entire area. BBB is the best at what they do, and this project deserved that.”

The project posed dilemmas for the architects from the beginning. In general, new developments can be difficult because of unit mix (how many studios, one-bedrooms, two-bedrooms, three-bedrooms, etc.) and apartment sizes. Developers, marketers and architects can argue, rethink and obsess over unit mix for months. Adaptive reuse, because the building’s “core” is firmly in place (elevator shafts and structural columns), can be a nightmare.

“Rebuilding the core is impossible,” says Frederick A. Bland, BBB Architects & Planners’ partner-in-charge for Belltel. “You can’t move the plumbing or the elevator shafts. This was a big deep office building with a core at the back of the building. It wasn’t easy, but to solve the question of laying out these homes, we ended up creating long galleries or entry hallways leading to large, open, spaces.”

The results are wide, long spaces, sometimes 70 feet, even in studio and one-bedrooms. It’s as if each apartment has a reveal at the end of a corridor — a large open space with immovable structural columns adding character, like in a SoHo loft. To break up the open spaces around the living areas, BBB added home occupancy spaces that can be used as offices, libraries, or baby rooms.



*The view from the common roof deck. (Belltel)*

“The home offices have sliding glass doors so as not to feel enclosed,” says Bland. “We argued about getting the galleries this wide, as we wanted nothing in these apartments to feel crowded.

Because the galleries were so wide, we were able to line the entryways with closets, giving people who live here something not many other New Yorkers have — huge amounts of closet and storage space.”

The building has 250 homes with over 100 floor plans, 58 of which have private terraces. Sixty percent of the building is already sold with one-bedrooms costing as low as \$460,000 and 1,400-square-foot two-bedrooms listed at \$799,000. Common charges and taxes can be less than \$325 per month for the smaller units.

In the past few weeks, six apartments went under contract with two accepted offers on the table. Internet advertising, according to Bistricher, shows 2,000 additional visits to the Web site per week.

Although sizable, as in 917-square-foot studios, some apartments on the lower floors lack light.

This is not the case on upper floors, where Walker’s original setback design takes over.

Just released by the developer, 21 penthouses are on floors 19 through 27. Ceiling heights on the penthouse floors are 12 to 14 feet, with square footage ranging from 1,178 for a one-bedroom with a home office to 2,715 for three-bedroom family homes with traditional layouts. Views of New York Harbor, skyline, and southern Brooklyn are central to these homes.

There are also two duplex penthouses with private elevators and terraces. Each duplex has 2,700 square feet of interior space and has a terrace over 500 square feet. They could be released in March.

“This is the nicest part of the building,” says Bistricher. “All of these homes get the most light and have the best views. The privacy up there is amazing. It’s like being alone in your own mansion in the sky.”

With only three apartments per floor, the homes on floors 20 to 26 share huge elevator landings with four lifts per floor. Prices range from \$850,000 to \$2 million. Bamboo floors and kitchens with wine refrigerators are standard. Tribeca-based interior designer Melanie Feinbloom turned three units, or the entire 21st floor, into different examples of how buyers can use the space. Onehome is for a young couple with a baby.

Another is for a male artist. The last apartment is a three-bedroom made for a family with several children.

“These spaces were so big it was hard to fill them,” says Feinbloom, who sourced furniture from various Web sites and local boutiques such as White on White. “The apartments really lend themselves to different styles of living. Elegant, cool, homey – you can do it all here.”

Something is working. Three penthouses already sold. One interested buyer of lives in the building. Expecting her second child, the owner wants more space in a building she and her young family “love.”

“My husband and I both grew up in Brooklyn and there was no way we were living anywhere else in the world,” says the penthouse hunter who wished not to be identified. “I was skeptical about totally new construction, and wanted something with good bones; 110 Livingston, another historic conversion, was too expensive.

“We love it here. My grandmother says walking into the lobby is like walking into Radio City Music Hall. There are lots of young families. We don’t want to leave the building. The amenities are great. It took a little while, but we like the area now, too.”

Downtown Brooklyn has seen improvement. All major subway lines are within blocks of the building. Supermarkets, hotels and restaurants are coming slowly. Fort Greene, Brooklyn Heights and Atlantic Ave. are less than 10 minutes away. Other condominiums have risen nearby. Some retail stretches need drastic improvement, but the area is experiencing a revival, along with the Belltel building.

“It’s a great thrill to see a whole other generation of life using this building,” says BBB’s Bland, explaining the fruits of adaptive reuse. “I never thought I’d live to see the day people in huge quantities lived in downtown Brooklyn. There is new street life. “Investment, which wasn’t there for decades, is prevalent. The renaissance is really about the entire area.”

For more info, go to [Belltellofts.com](http://Belltellofts.com).