

A New Take on Lobby Art

At 605 Third Ave., digital installations create an interactive space

By Keiko Morris | April 20, 2016

An office lobby functions primarily as a welcome mat, a waiting room or a meeting place. But the team behind the redesign of one Midtown lobby has used lighting and computer technology to create what it hopes will be a more reflective space.

At 605 Third Ave., on the lobby's glass facade facing the sidewalk, the Rockwell Group has installed two 15- by 15-foot panels, each comprising 900 translucent tiles that display a range of computer-generated patterns.

Concentric diamonds morph into rotating fragments of geometric shapes on one panel, while on another, Tetris-like blocks fall into place and form a city skyline. Or a wave sweeps across the tiles, responding to an outdoor wind sensor. Inspired by the kaleidoscope, the installation seen from the inside of the lobby frames the flow of people and cars outside, said David Rockwell, president and founder of the Rockwell Group.



Kaleidoscopes “are a combination of ordinary and magical,” said Mr. Rockwell, who has collected more than 100 of them. “You can see the magic. You can see what the thing is that is being transformed.”

The installations are part of a more than \$25 million lobby renovation undertaken by the building’s owner, Fisher Brothers. The company wanted to reinvent the lobby to give the building a distinct identity, said partner Winston Fisher. The firm is marketing about 400,000 square feet, which will be available next year.

“We wanted to have something that was corporate but a little bit cutting-edge,” Mr. Fisher said. “We wanted to be unique and distinguished in a classy way.”

The lobby was designed to create a moment of reflection as visitors or tenants move from the street to the office, Mr. Rockwell said. It is in these transitional spaces, where passersby are between one activity and the next, that people are most open to some sort of engagement, Mr. Rockwell said.



In this case, the lobby’s subtle ambient interior lighting enhances the reflective mood, he said.

At a close-up view from within, the installation “takes street life and turns it into a performance,” Mr. Rockwell said. Standing further back in the high-ceilinged passageways that frame the elevator banks, the panels can make viewers feel as though they are inside a kaleidoscope.

Rockwell's architecture studio designed the lobby, while the LAB at Rockwell Group, the firm's interactive-technology practice, created the big LCD panels that display a spectrum of 256 shades, ranging from clear to black. The LAB built the software and the content for the panels, providing about six motifs, including the wind-responsive pattern.

Another theme creates moving images that look like the waves of an equalizer based on music programmed to play in the lobby. The idea is to keep the images and installations unpredictable.

The kaleidoscope-inspired theme has another surprise tucked into the back of the lobby. Portholes a little over 3 inches in diameter have been cut out in the wall at the end of each of the two elevator passageways. A peek into one reveals changing images transformed by a kaleidoscope-like filter from Artsy, an online art platform. The other offers similarly altered images from Flickr, the online photo-sharing tool.

The portholes offer a more intimate experience, Mr. Rockwell said. There are no signs guiding tenants or visitors to peer into the holes.

"I'd actually prefer tenants to discover this on their own," he said.
