

It May Be a Jungle Out There, but No Longer in the Lobby



Annie Tritt for The New York Times

The sparse lobby at 1330 Avenue of the Americas.

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For decades, it has been practically an unwritten rule of office building design that a high-end building should have lushly landscaped lobbies or atriums. The forest's worth of magnolia, pear and eucalyptus placed inside the [Ford Foundation](#) building in 1967 perhaps kicked off the trend, which culminated in the late 1980s when the World Financial Center decorated its Winter Garden with rows of soaring palms.

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The lobby at 45 Broadway, with plants, pond and waterfall.

Today, though, tastes seem to be undergoing a change, with owners seeking a leaner less-is-more look for their lobbies where the only touches of greenery are often a few cut flowers in a security desk vase.

Plants are also less common now in upstairs hallways and offices, according to landlords, property managers, brokers and landscapers, as tenants take less space than in decades past. With the smaller footprints, they tend to use flora sparingly.

While more buildings are planting their roofs with grass, trees or shrubs, the interior landscaping industry finds itself in a difficult place, professionals say.

“We were very lucky before, because everybody wanted plants, and lots of them,” said John Mini, a landscaper in Rockland County since 1973. His work included rebuilding the Winter Garden, where 16 palms had to be replaced after the Sept. 11 attacks. Twenty years ago, he estimates, 80 percent of all New York City office building lobbies were landscaped; today, he says, only about half are. “It’s all changing, and unless we keep up, we will be in trouble,” he said.

Some notable new high-rises have opted for plantless lobbies. These include the IAC Building, designed by [Frank Gehry](#) in West Chelsea; and One Bryant Park, the [Bank of America](#) tower in Midtown developed by the [Durst Organization](#), where tenants already occupy the lower half of the building.

Next year One Bryant Park will add an urban garden room at the southwest corner of the Avenue of the Americas and 43rd Street, which will feature an enclosed public space with plantings and benches accessible from the sidewalk, but separated from the lobby by a wall, according to the Durst Organization.

Retrofitted buildings also often tend to be less leafy, like 1330 Avenue of the Americas, a 40-story glass-and-steel high-rise at West 54th Street owned by the Macklowe Organization that is opening this week after a \$30 million nine-month renovation.

Within the lobby, gone are the “ ’80s-style planters with funky curves,” the focal point has become blue chairs and a glass table atop a new terrazzo floor, said Paul Amrich, the C. B. Richard Ellis broker who is marketing the property.

“Cluttering a lobby with plants doesn’t work well from a leasing standpoint,” Mr. Amrich said. He said the building, which has a cleaner entry and a new facade, had been able to raise annual rents to as much as \$130 a square foot, from \$80 before the renovations. The building is 80 percent leased.

Elaborate landscaping can require a lot of water and maintenance. Since this is potentially costly, it can make a big impact on a building’s operating budget, a heightened concern at a time of rising inflation, said Thomas R. Krizmanic, a principal of Studios Architecture in the firm’s New York office.

“Indoor landscaping isn’t a priority on the minds of my clients,” he said, citing the building at 731 Lexington Avenue, whose office segment is known as the Bloomberg Tower and whose residential segment is called One Beacon Court. Mr. Krizmanic helped design the building, which was developed in 2005 by [Vornado Realty Trust](#).

The bulk of plants in the office part of the complex are 40 ficus trees lining a sixth-floor connecting walkway, though a lack of natural light on the ground floor also made plants impractical for the lobby, Mr. Krizmanic said.

That owners and tenants are installing fewer plants while generally supporting trends for more environmentally friendly buildings seems like a contradiction to M. J. Gilhooley, the program coordinator for the eight-year-old Green Plants for Green Buildings, an advocacy group based in Loveland, Ohio.

Ms. Gilhooley, whose group was initially financed by the landscaping industry, acknowledged that the most salable aspect of indoor plants was their ability to beautify spaces. But, she said, referencing a range of scientific studies, they can also make workers more attentive, absent less and more productive. Spiky-leaved bamboo palms, for one, are known to absorb potentially harmful formaldehyde emitted by certain woods and insulations, she said.

Yet, the United States Green Building Council, which promotes eco-friendly construction through its Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design benchmarks, or LEED, which developers must meet to be certified, does not award points for indoor plants.

“The meat and potatoes of green buildings are usually what you can’t see,” said Russell Unger, the executive director of the council’s New York chapter.

Still, the council does encourage planted roofs, and landscapers are responding, said Teresa Carleo, the founder of Plant Fantasies, a 21-year-old company in Manhattan that has one completed commercial project to its credit and five planned.

For instance, on the 7,000-square-foot roof at 250 Hudson Street, a former printing plant in Hudson Square being converted to offices by Jack Resnick & Sons, Ms. Carleo will install crab apple trees and prairie grasses in stark contrast to the lobby, which will be essentially bare, she said.

Residential roofs are being similarly dressed up, said Howard Freilich, the founder of Blondies Treehouse, a 29-year-old landscaping business in Westchester County.

While office building lobbies once clearly made up most New York projects for the company, he said condos do now.

An example is the Caledonia, a Related Companies complex on West 17th Street where Mr. Freilich recently planted three roof gardens that totaled 20,000 square feet and included 100 trees and 1,000 cubic yards of soil.

“We really have to adapt and mold to the changing business to stay alive,” he said.

Not every landlord is swapping lobby plants for roof ones. In fact, the Cammeby’s Management Company last year actually increased the landscaping in the lobby at 45

Broadway, a 32-story financial district tower, where a waterfall tumbles into a 3,000-gallon pond.

As part of the \$500,000 renovation, the pond received 120 koi and new beds of colorful plants were installed, while taller potted versions were added by the elevators, said Aron Weber, a Cammeby's director.

Interior landscaping, if done properly, may not only attract tenants but retain them, he said. A virtual indoor park is "a good place to calm yourself down when you're having a bad day," said Mr. Weber, adding, "I've used it myself."