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Don King used to sit atop Rockefeller Center - his office was there. From 1986 through 2005, only King and a few other fortunates were in a position to enjoy the spectacular view of Manhattan from the observatories on Rockefeller Center's 67th through 70th floors. But thanks to the initiative of co-owner Tishman-Speyer, those once-crumbling observation decks are again open to the public. The Top of the Rock™ refurbishment included a full renovation of the decks plus a set of educational and entertaining multimedia exhibits. Together, they provide a satisfying visitor experience for locals as well as tourists. Top of the Rock opened to well-deserved fanfare on Nov 1, 2005.

The relationship between the architect and designer on a project of this kind will be reflected in the outcome. In this case, they worked very well together and the result is cohesive and seamless. Top of the Rock fused sophisticated entertainment and exhibit technology with permanent architecture under the watchful eye of preservation. To get a successful, professional result absolutely required top-level teamwork. Multimedia designer Bob Weis Design Island (BWDI, Orlando) and architect Gabellini Sheppard Associates LLP (New York) helmed a virtuoso group recruited from both coasts that functioned as a temporary virtual company. Project management was provided by Seruto & Company (Pasadena) and tech talent by AME (Glendale, California) and TechnoMedia Solutions (Orlando). Wayfinding was courtesy of Hunt Design Associates (Pasadena).

On the team we had both exhibit builders and facility builders, Seruto points out. "And from a construction standpoint, some things are permanent and some are able to be changed 10 years down the road if needed. In the mezzanine where the exhibits are, for example, some of the curved walls are just exhibit walls with graphics: easy to remove. The theater space, on the other hand, needed to be integral to the architecture and the infrastructure."

"Someone from the technology supplier would be onsite full-time," recalls Seruto. "Plus, we had a project manager from Tishman-Speyer and a project manager from Gabellini Sheppard. I was onsite about once a month for several days at a time. Bob Weis was there a lot with his

**A workman raises a flag on one of the unfinished decks of Rockefeller Center in the 1930s.  
Courtesy of Rockefeller Center Archives**



people, especially Tim Steinouer. Bob is a great initiator of projects and also has a great presence: he neutralizes tension and conflict and focuses on what matters. If anything came up we'd all get together and powwow to figure out the best, most cost-effective solution. We were all looking out for each other."

Throughout demolition and construction, it was necessary that the building and its systems continue to function without significant interruption to serve the existing tenants, including broadcaster NBC. Easier said than done, but done it was. "We were building an exhibit, yes, but also doing a pretty major remodel of an historic building," says Seruto. "We cut through two floors of Rockefeller Center and we had to keep the building going for the tenants 24/7." Much of the work was done outside normal business hours (at union rates). The A/C, electrical and plumbing were all temporarily re-routed; something Seruto had experience with in a previous project for a hospital.

At times the process resembled an archeological dig – or open-heart surgery without a precise knowledge of the patient's anatomy. "Sometimes we'd be opening up places without knowing just what we'd find," says Kimberly Sheppard. She described the installation of an escalator from one deck to another. It required cutting through an exterior wall. Determining just exactly where to locate it was a balancing act taking into account not only the smooth flow of visitor traffic but also the needs of preservation, with the imperative not to disturb – not even to touch – the NBC transmission cables that run through the building. But no one knew the precise path the cables ran. It took cautious excavation to locate and sidestep them.

## The multimedia experience

A typical visitor spends 15-30 minutes among the exhibits and media on the mezzanine before boarding the Sky Shuttle elevators to the observatory. A system of timed tickets has been effective in preventing long lines, and people flow smoothly through the room as they take in the dramatic and uplifting story of how Rockefeller Center was created. (In spite of powerful economic setbacks in the midst of the Great Depression when it was built, the Center rose to world prominence in broadcasting, international business and the arts.) Traditional displays of imagery and text



# Top of the Rock

Virtuoso Teamwork  
Makes a Virtuoso Project

*By Judith Rubin*



**Top:** Gazing upward through the transparent ceiling of the Sky Shuttle – an original 1930s Rockefeller Center elevator – as it travels 70 stories from the mezzanine exhibits to the rooftop observatory. LED lights and washes of color illuminate and punctuate the elevator shaft. The see-through ceiling doubles as a video screen that flashes images of cultural and news events spanning seven decades, transforming the ride into a quick time-jump.

**Bottom:** A young visitor steps onto the Beam Walk for a veritiginous experience that is the closest most of us will ever come to balancing on a metal building skeleton 67 floors up. A real steel beam from the building is set into the heavy glass surface. Look down, and six projectors set below the glass deliver a realistic moving image of Rockefeller Center under construction, complete with 1930s ironworkers eating lunch on the framework and a sidewalk far, far below. *Courtesy of Rockefeller Center Archives. © Paul Warchol*



on curved, floor-to-ceiling exhibit panels are punctuated by three multimedia high points: the Beam Walk, the HD video theater and the Sky Shuttle itself.

About halfway around the ovate room, guests encounter the Beam Walk, which is the closest most of us will ever come to balancing on a metal building skeleton 67 floors up. It was conceived by Bob Weis and inspired by a period photo of Rockefeller Center ironworkers eating lunch high up on the unfinished building. Stepping across a heavy

glass surface, guests peer down at a moving picture of an authentic-looking 1930s construction zone, with workers going about their business in living color. It's a film loop, a composite of live action and animation, projected from beneath the floor. Six projectors, set into a five-foot pit, were coordinated to deliver the edge-butt image. A real steel beam dissected from the building and set into the glass surface enhances the reality. The Beam Walk is optional if you've got vertigo - just walk around instead of over it.

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Beneath the gently sloping, ADA-graded floor of the exhibit area are the electronic guts, well-concealed but easily accessed when necessary. The sloped floor gradually and naturally leads guests to the three-tiered, standup theater (capacity: about 60). There, on three HD video screens, 10.5 feet by 6 feet each, they watch up to three uplifting, multi-media documentaries. The documentaries were directed by Bob Weis and produced by Design Island.

"A Day In The Life Of A Rockette" is an upbeat, heartwarming story of a modern-day Rockette: A young woman realizes her childhood dream to become a member of the famous precision dance troupe that graces Radio City Music Hall.

In "Tom Brokaw - The Plaza," the popular NBC news anchor speaks about Rockefeller Center's historic significance as a news base, and revisits some great news moments and events that have occurred at the Center throughout the years.

In "David Rockefeller Remembers," the 87-year-old, who still enjoys going to his office every day at the complex built by his father John D. Rockefeller Jr. reminisces about the history and development of Rockefeller Center as a hub of modern business, internationalism, newscasting and entertainment.

### An elevator becomes a must-see exhibit

The retrofitting that transformed 1930s elevators into 21st century Sky Shuttles symbolizes the connection between past and future at Top of the Rock. "We took something from the age of gears and pulleys, and yanked it into the age of electronics," comments Mellissa Berry of BWDI. Guests look upward through the transparent ceiling of the elevator and see a quick time capsule of media images spanning the decades from the 1930s to the present. This heightens the sense of history and refers back to Rockefeller Center's status as a media center. The transparent projection surface also provides a clear view of the elevator shaft. This turns out to be



Nancy Seruto

quite a fascinating view while zipping along 70 stories, up or down – and BWDI has enhanced it with color and light. On the elevator roof are four projectors, and eight LED lights that shine up into the shaft rotating a sequence of colors. At regular intervals, along the shaft in the corners, are installed four LED lights that resemble airport landing lights, to accentuate the long vanishing point. The computers and control systems reside in a box on the underside of the elevator.



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Getting this part of the exhibit just so was a huge and complicated task. "There was a lot of prototyping and a lot of coordinating with facility elevator operations team," says Seruto. "When you take away the ceiling on an old elevator, you have machinery, cables, I-beams, obstructions. To provide a clear view of the shaft through the new transparent ceiling, we re-engineered the cables and downsized the I-beam. Now they just form a minor obstruction that feels like part of the works you observe when looking up. When you take an elevator and bring it below the floor to work on," notes Seruto, "there's a high wind going all the time in the shaft. You open the doors and it practically blows you backwards." Elevator maintenance in this part of the building now includes cleaning the transparent ceilings as well as the shafts themselves.

The remarkably smooth teamwork of this project is all the more striking knowing that Gabellini Sheppard came on board just about a year before opening. BWDI and Seruto were already fairly deep into things at that point. "It was all very fast track," notes Seruto.

"There was a pause while Gabellini developed its approach. We filled them in on how far we'd come with the concepts. We had a menu of experiences and ideas to work into the architectural envelope. Michael Gabellini started developing a style for the space, and



started us thinking in different ways. Some things changed and some stayed intact. The elevator stayed the same. The mezzanine guest experience changed a lot as the harsh realities of the budget sank in. With an architect on board, an experienced designer and a media person, we had to find a vocabulary that worked all around - a way to talk to each other. And we needed a visual design vocabulary - how to draw things, and who would draw what."

A successful project of this kind signals a maturity in the integration of show technology with permanent construction, outside the realm of theme parks. Project owners are learning to draw on creative companies such as BWDI for their ability to take the technologies and tools of entertainment and apply them with powerful effect to educational exhibits, heritage centers and visitors centers. In Top of the Rock, the use of those tools and technologies is ruled, appropriately, by how they help tell the story. And thanks to good teamwork, all the elements snuggle comfortably together. "We were all happy with the balance between architecture and exhibitry," comments Seruto. "Rockefeller Center is not a black box - it's one of America's architectural treasures, and you have to respect the role of architecture in something like this." When the creatives and the contractors, the architects and designers and the techs all enter into meaningful dialogue, there's practically nothing such a team can't accomplish. The sky's the limit.



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