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## When the Desk in Your Lobby Is a Work of Art

Luxury-apartment developers like Harry Macklowe differentiate their projects by replacing front desks with sculptural pieces inspired by rappers and classical paintings

By Candace Taylor Dec. 5, 2018



Developer Harry Macklowe stands with the lobby desk he designed for his new condominium at 200 East 59th Street. CHRIS SORENSEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Interviews with real estate developers don't usually involve cavemen and the origins of civilization. But most aren't Harry Macklowe, the 81-year-old builder whose storied ups and downs are the stuff of New York real estate legend.

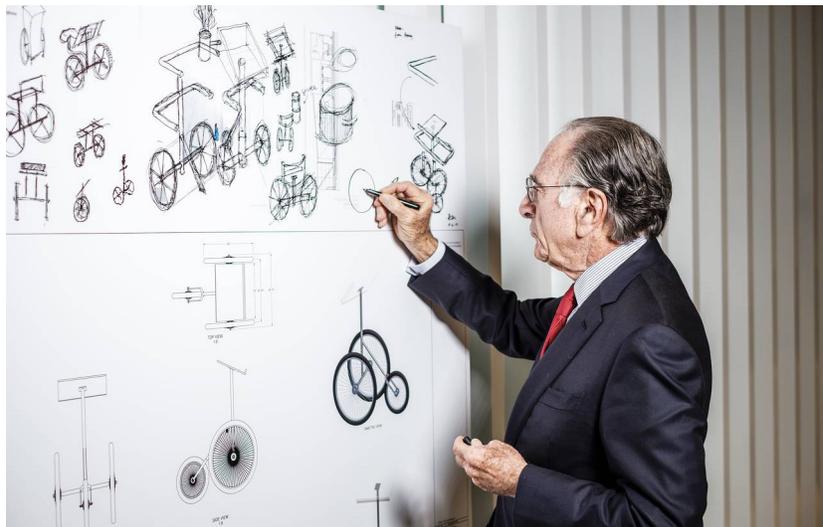
On a recent autumn morning, a tweed-clad Mr. Macklowe was showing off the lobby "desk" at his under-construction condominium at 200 East 59th Street. More akin to a tricycle than a piece of furniture, the three-

wheeled contraption glides across the white terrazzo floor, allowing the doorman to move while greeting residents.

As New York City developers vie to differentiate their projects amid a market slowdown, the standard lobby desk is being replaced with eye-catching, sculptural pieces. Most developers outsource the work to an interior designer or architect; Mr. Macklowe, by contrast, obsessively designed the desk himself.

“The tires were very important,” Mr. Macklowe said while nudging the delicate structure back and forth. He said he wanted to evoke a bicycle, “an ordinary object that we all know from our childhood, something that’s universally accepted, something that made us different from the caveman. The wheel, the primary form of civilization, is here and adapted to an everyday use.”

His initial inspiration for the glass-and-steel podium-on-wheels came from a newspaper photograph of Liberian rapper Lyrical D performing in his wheelchair. “The wheel of the wheelchair, it caught my eye,” he said. An art collector, Mr. Macklowe said the photo also reminded him of the sculpture “Chariot” by Alberto Giacometti. “Those thoughts came to mind, and I started to sketch,” he said. He surmises he drew about six versions before arriving at the final desk, which was custom-fabricated in Brooklyn from low-iron glass and stainless steel polished to a high sheen.



The developer’s description of the process offers a glimpse into the unique worldview that’s been a hallmark of Mr. Macklowe’s decades-long career, which has had its share of triumphs—designing the glass “cube” at the General Motors Building, netting sky-high prices at the supertall condo 432 Park Avenue—and failures, such as selling the GM building to avoid financial collapse.

Here he’s paired the desk with white Italian Carrara marble walls and two large, colorful reproductions of classical paintings, including Jacopo da Pontormo’s “Visitation,” from the 1500s. “I believe in classic design,” Mr. Macklowe said. “Something that is strong and will be recognized as good 25 or 50 years from now.” Gesturing to the Pontormo, he said, “Here you have a painting from the Medici, from the 16th century,” while the moving desk is “modernity from the 21st century. I think we blended [eras] to make a statement about the tone of the building.”

The desk notably has no chair--one early version had a tractor seat. (There is a chair available to the staff at night.) “The doorman is up, he’s greeting,” he said. “It’s not a massive building where we have staff sitting behind desks.” The tower, scheduled to be finished in early 2019, will have 67-units, with one-bedrooms starting at \$1.875 million. Mr. Macklowe declined to disclose how many units have sold so far.

**Above:** Mr. Macklowe said he drew six versions of the lobby desk over several months. **Left:** “The tires were very important,” Mr. Macklowe said of the glass-and-steel podium-on-wheels. PHOTO: CHRIS SORENSEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL