

English pull off an inside job at former Polyclinic

BY BONNIE ROSENSTOCK

While most East Villagers were preparing their costumes for Halloween night, the London-based consulting firm ?What If? was rushing to put the final touches on its new office space, a long-anticipated treat. On Oct. 31, the company (initial question mark, final exclamation point), moved into its new U.S. headquarters at 137 Second Ave. and Ninth St., the former home of the Cabrini Stuyvesant Polyclinic, vacant since August 2006.

Just days before the big move from 62 White St. in Tribeca, amid the banging, clanging, drilling, scraping, power-sawing and swirling dust, The Villager was afforded an exclusive walk-through with Nina Powell, one of the managing partners, who explained the renovations that have unmasked and restored the historic 1884 structure's interior to its original glory. The exterior is landmarked for its extraordinary pressed-brick facade and molded terra-cotta, sculpted burts and ornamental details.

Powell described the renovation process of stripping the building back to what it was as "a journey of discovery."

"We knew what was original and what wasn't in terms of walls and things like that," she said. "Anything that wasn't structural, any ceiling nor original, just rip it down."

When they demolished the dropped ceilings in the main hall and at the top of the stairs, they discovered blacked-out skylights, which they have cleaned up. The demolition also uncovered a row of



Villager photo by Simon Kormanov

Restoration work by ?What If? has uncovered decorative columns in the former Cabrini Stuyvesant Polyclinic's stairwell.

stained-glass windows in the hall ceiling. All other windows have been restored and glass replaced, as well.

Workers were laboriously scraping

down to the original multicolored tile floors, which had been overlaid with concrete. On areas where there weren't any remaining original tiles, they have put down high-gloss, durable epoxy floors, which set off the dramatic white walls.

The polyclinic's four or five small consultation rooms behind the main hall have been consolidated into one, large, spacious, state-of-the-art kitchen with long, stainless-steel counters.

The winding marble staircase on the two upper floors was boxed in with walls before but is now airily exposed, together with heretofore hidden decorative columns.

"We want to restore the interconnectivity of the building," explained Powell. "To do that, we have opened up the space."

On the third floor, behind a door, they discovered a secret, narrow, wooden stairway leading up to the attic, which is being gutted and renovated for storage space.

The enormous undertaking is jointly funded by ?What If? and the building's owner, Lower East Side Equities. The terms of the lease agreement were not disclosed. Powell acknowledged that before they began, she Googled articles and saw there was a lot of passion about the building, so "we can't mess it up," she said. "I think being an English company, space is so important to us and we're used to old buildings. We're much more sympathetic to the quirks which come with them."

Andrew Berman, executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, located nearby on E. 11th St., who was also on hand for the tour, stated that it seems the company is being "incredibly respectful" of the building's historic detail in restoring it to its original. "It's really innovative in terms of how they are doing this,"

he commented. "There's been a lot of anxiety around it, since it's been empty for so long."

However, in a subsequent e-mail, Berman expressed disappointment the building is no longer serving a civic or charitable purpose as it has since its inception and as it was designed to do.

"Of course, it would be very hard for a charity to compete with the prices being asked for the building," he said. "But I am glad to see that, unlike prior plans, there is no addition of stories, no dorm and no club."

The company also hopes to make the 14,100-square-foot space as environmentally friendly as possible. They have put in a boiler that automatically cuts off when it reaches a certain temperature, and have signed up for Con Edison's wind-power option.

The 16-year-old company, the world's largest independently owned and operated innovation firm, has had a presence in New York since 2004.

"We've moved every two years until now, waiting until we felt big enough and confident enough," Powell said. "Now we want a new home." The company has 150 employees in London, where it was voted the number-one best company to work for in the U.K. on the Financial Times list two years running, and number 15 in both Manchester and Shanghai. The New York branch has 45 employees.

Powell noted that environment and behavior are so important to what the company does that they've designed the

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Nina Powell,

managing partner, ?What If?

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space so that each of the three floors will have a different purpose. The architect is David Mayerfeld Associates, and Studio MDA in Tribeca designed the interior and lighting.

The first floor will be a communal gathering space, where clients can hang out and have quiet meetings. The second floor will be the quiet floor. The top floor will be the noisy floor.

The company practices a concept known as "hot desking," meaning no one has a permanent desk.

"They come in each morning, go to their locker, get what they need for the day and sit anywhere," explained Powell. "How you choose where you sit is according to the work you're going to do. We believe that one of the key enablers of creativity is the environment you put people in. You stick people in little gray cubicles, they are going to have gray, quite small ideas. If you are working on a presentation and need quiet

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Seniors happen to like Murphy, Fogel, The Villager

Broadway and New York government intersected at Caring Community's Oct. 27 gala at Tribeca Rooftop, with, above from left, Arthur Makar, The Caring Community executive director; Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer; Assemblymember Deborah Glick; Broadway star Donna Murphy, and her husband, actor Shawn Elliott. Murphy received The Caring Community's 2008 Greenwich Village Alumni Award. Dr. Joyce Fogel, chief of geriatrics at St. Vincent's Medical Center in the Village, received the 2008 Humanitarian Award. And The Villager received The Caring Community's 2008 Corporate Partner Award. Murphy wowed the crowd by belting out Cole Porter's classic showstopper "I Happen To Like New York." Makar said the seniors at The Caring Community's Washington Square North day facility are huge fans of The Villager. "The Villager arrives at 8:45 a.m. every Thursday," he told the audience, "and by 9:15, it's gone. And for the rest of the week the stories, particularly the political stories, are debated and discussed among the seniors. It's that kind of paper, with its first-rate journalism and its community involvement."

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space, you sit in one area. If you want to bounce ideas around a lot of people and be quite collaborative, you choose a different area. If you are working on e-mails and phone calls, a different space."

"What If!" specializes in business growth strategies that help companies shape their innovation agenda by delivering new products and new brands. Additionally, it runs training programs with organizations to build their innovation capabilities. The company's client list includes Unilever, BP, PepsiCo, Kraft, Nike, Coors, AOL, Barclays, Kellogg's, Quaker and HSBC, to name a few.

They have also established the "What If!" Social Innovation Foundation, which uses the company's core skill set to help "social entrepreneurs" start up their businesses. According to the company's Web site, social entrepreneurs are individuals who create or develop businesses — either commercial or nonprofit — where the primary focus is on social change.

"Eight years ago, we said we wanted

to do more than make money — although it's important for our clients and for us," Powell said. "We also wanted to have a social impact in the world, as well."

A former client of "What If!", Independent Diplomat, a nonprofit dedicated to international relations, diplomacy and conflict prevention, has been invited to share part of the monumental Second Ave. space. When "What If!" first worked with the company, it was just one person. Now the organization has about 20 people, of which 15 will be based here.

Powell indicated that the firm wants to be good neighbors by supporting local vendors and suppliers and shopping at the Greenmarket. They are also going to collaborate on a celebration with the next-door Ottendorfer Library when the two buildings turn 125 years old next year, and plan to participate in next October's Open House New York weekend.

"We're really excited to be part of the community," she said. "Many of our employees live in the neighborhood, so they are happy to be here. This is our home for the next 10, 15 years, and we plan to grow into it."

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Villager photo by Bonnie Rosenstock

A worker restoring an original tile floor in the former Cabrini Stuyvesant Polyclinic, now home to the English innovation firm ?What If!.