



Rewriting the Book

By Joe Barks, Editor

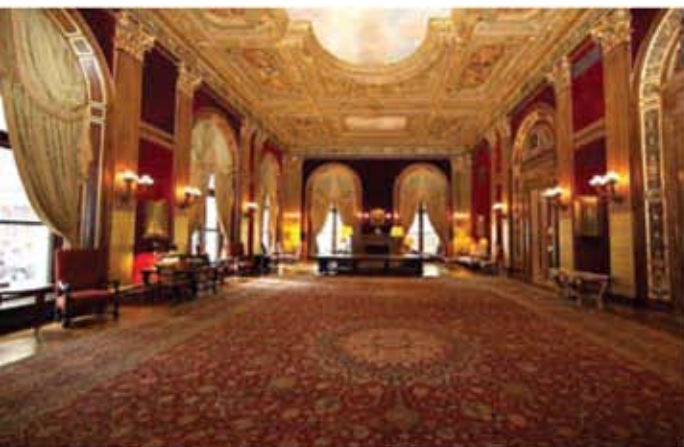
All club managers have to deal with local utilities and agencies as a matter of course. But when your property is a multi-story, landmark 115-year-old building in the middle of Manhattan, “dealing with the locals” means potential tangles with the likes of Consolidated Edison and the New York City Department of Transportation.

Yet when John Dorman, CCM, General Manager of The University Club of New York, describes how his club has worked out issues with those entities, he makes it all sound small-town simple.

“We replaced our sidewalk two years ago with very special black cement, to comply with the club’s standards, as detailed with the Landmark Preservation Commission,” Dorman says. “But when Con Ed then had to do some work on the street, they were going to replace what they broke up with standard grey cement. We got in touch with them and helped them find the right material to use.

“Another time, we saw that the transportation department was going to put in new meters very close to our entrance,” he adds. “But we worked with them to find a good compromise.”

Dorman doesn’t tell these stories to brag about



Under Dorman’s direction, all rooms in The University Club’s 200,000-sq. ft. building, including its hallmark Library (right), have been restored to their full grandeur.

PHOTOS COURTESY THE UNIVERSITY CLUB OF NEW YORK

how he was able to take on behemoth bureaucracies and get his way. His main point in relating them is to highlight his pride in having an operation where everyone in the organization, starting with the front lines (in the case of the parking meter, a security person first noticed an "x" on the sidewalk), constantly looks out for the club's best interests.

"It's all about having a culture of caring, paying attention to detail and catching things early," says Dorman. "We try to make everyone feel they belong, and encourage self-policing within our departments." To emphasize that shared sense of belonging, after learning he had earned recognition through the Excellence in Club Management Awards, co-sponsored by the McMahon Group and *Club & Resort Business*, as the 2012 recipient of the Mel Rex Award for City, Athletic or Specialty Clubs, one of the first things Dorman did was order replica awards for all 19 of his department heads.

Rebuilding the Sanctuary

When he came to The University Club in 1997 after successfully climbing the ranks as a chef and F&B manager in the hotel industry, Dorman had to address much bigger issues before he could start to get everyone focused on the details. The club's indebtedness approached eight figures, and basic maintenance of its building—which the club built in 1899—had been seriously deferred.

Dorman saw restoring the building, and reviving the appeal of the activities it contained, as the keys to turning things around. "The club can be a special

Achievements

AT THE UNIVERSITY CLUB OF NEW YORK UNDER JOHN DORMAN'S DIRECTION

■ Over \$45 million in capital expenditures, made steadily in \$3 to \$4 million increments over the past 15 years and allocated between front- and back-of-the-house needs, have restored the 115-year-old building's grandeur and functionality.

■ Food-and-beverage program has grown by an average annual rate of 5%, to now top over 180,000 annual covers and generate positive cash flow.

■ Original fitness center was fully restored, and a second center and training studio were added, growing fitness membership by 200, to now total close to 900.

■ Squash facilities were expanded from two to six International courts, plus a doubles court, and squash membership has more than doubled, from 350 to over 700.

■ Renovation and increased promotion for the club's 100 overnight rooms boosted occupancy rates from the low 60s to as high as 73%, with a near-doubling of revenues.



Renovation and increased promotion for the club's 100 overnight rooms helped to boost occupancy rates and provide additional capital for building improvements.

place because of where it's located and the values it represents," he says. "In the middle of how busy New York can get, it's an important and uniquely appealing building where you can walk in and right away get a sense of 'Ah...here's where I can take a breath; this is truly an oasis in the bustling city.' "

To generate the funds needed for the capital improvements that would not only return the building to its full grandeur, but also improve its functionality, Dorman directed simultaneous upgrades of the club's dining, recreational and lodging offers (see "Achievements" and "Ideas" boxes with this article; for details on how Dorman has grown The University Club's impressive F&B operation, see "Big-City Business" in the Spring 2013 issue of *C&RB's Chef to Chef* supplement).

Just as importantly, while making the steady climb back to financial health—as it prepares for its sesquicentennial in 2015, its balance sheet now shows ample cash reserves—The University Club didn't waver from its core values, even in the face of economic turbulence that hit New York especially hard.

"During the tough times of 2001 and 2008, there was discussion about becoming more casual or allowing things we'd never permitted," Dorman says. "But they were fast discussions, with our leadership quickly pointing out that if we made changes, they'd be made forever, and we'd lose the traditions and much of the culture that has made the club special."

Dorman says he has also been fortunate to work with exceptional leadership from among the membership, along with thoughtful committees and a strong staff. "Those are the true



The University Club has struck a balance between formal dining (left) and more casual dining (in its Tap Room), and also between member *a la carte* and banquet meals, which evenly split a total of more than 180,000 annual covers. A regular series of nightly specials has helped to build regular followings for both dining formats.

keys to the club's success," he says.

"Even for our younger members," Dorman notes, "a traditional club like this, which pays attention to details on many levels, can still be an oasis for them."

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Ideas

IMPLEMENTED SUCCESSFULLY AT THE UNIVERSITY CLUB OF NEW YORK UNDER JOHN DORMAN'S DIRECTION



- "Summer Guest" membership initiative continued to contribute to steady overall growth in membership (from 3,700 to 4,500 in 15 years), with about 65% now converting to full-time membership after first joining as Summer Guest members.



The University Club of New York has occupied just three buildings in its history and has been in its current location since 1899.

- Over 200 member events are held annually, from lunch programs with prominent speakers (who are retained without fees) to overseas trips.
- "Golf Opportunities" program gives members access to leading private courses in the area, through reservations made through the fitness center.
- Roof/terrace adjacent to main dining room was fully restored to enhance spring and summer dining and special events.