

SHIRLEY LEUNG

# Robin Brown restores Times Square hotel to glory



By [Shirley Leung](#) | GLOBE STAFF MAY 27, 2015

NEW YORK — Here comes Robin Brown again, trying to spruce up the neighborhood. This time he's taking on Times Square.

The legendary former general manager of Boston's Four Seasons turned hotel investor has taken his show on the road to restore the Knickerbocker hotel and bring high style to a part of Manhattan better known for big chains and wall-to-wall tourists.

Better yet, Brown, who still lives in the Boston area, got to confront the Curse of the Bambino.

Brown blew into Boston nearly three decades ago to help the Four Seasons transform a gritty part of Boylston Street that was known as the home of the Playboy Club. Today, that stretch of Boylston is among the ritziest in town.

Brown saw a similar opportunity in opening a 330-room hotel at 42d Street and Broadway this year. While Times Square has gone from vice to nice, Brown hopes the Knickerbocker will help usher in another dimension: luxury.

"We're going to tip over the transformation of Times Square," Brown, 59, told me recently over lunch at the hotel's restaurant, run by the New York celebrity chef Charlie Palmer.

The area is awash in hotels, but until recently an upscale option was not one of them. Judging by early reviews, travelers have taken to the idea of spending more than \$500 a night in a part of that city that never sleeps. The Knickerbocker, open since February, has risen to number three on TripAdvisor's rankings of hotels in New York City. One reviewer described the hotel as an "urban sanctuary."

Not that long ago, Times Square was sketchy. Then, in the '90s, Walt Disney Co. renovated the New Amsterdam Theatre, and the Gap moved into the neighborhood. Toys "R" Us opened a flagship store, complete with an indoor ferris wheel, cementing the area's reputation as family friendly.

Now there's a movement to tap into the square's rich history. Century-old Broadway theaters are being restored to their original luster. The Knickerbocker itself, built in 1906 by John Jacob Astor IV and converted to an office building after Prohibition, is again a fancy 15-story hotel after a \$250 million renovation.



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Robin Brown visited the rooftop lounge of the Knickerbocker, which reopened in February.

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“Times Square is always going to have something for everyone,” said Tim Tompkins, president of the Times Square Alliance, which promotes business and tourism in the area. “What’s distinctive about the Knickerbocker is the emphasis on history and elegance.”

The original Knickerbocker was the playground for New York’s rich and famous, including novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, president Teddy Roosevelt, and opera star Enrico Caruso. Meals were served on solid gold dishes, with cigars imported from Cuba and wine from Europe.

It also has an ignominious place in Red Sox history. According to a book about the Knickerbocker commissioned by the hotel, Red Sox owner Harry Frazee was a frequent guest. An investor in Broadway shows, Frazee defaulted on payments on Fenway Park when his shows began to lose money. After the 1919 season, he came up with a solution: Sell Babe Ruth to the Yankees.

Frazee broke the news to Sox manager Ed Barrow over drinks at the Knickerbocker. To which Barrow replied, “You ought to know you’re making a mistake.”

About five years ago, Highgate Holdings, a private investment group, bought the building and brought in Brown as an investor. Brown knew Highgate from his time working with the Boston Park Plaza, which Highgate also owned a piece of at one time. Highgate has since sold much of its stake in the Knickerbocker to FelCor Lodging Trust, a real estate investment trust.

Brown has remained deeply involved, helping to develop and design the Knickerbocker. He also brought in another Boston Four Seasons alum, Jeff David, to run the hotel. The Beaux Arts building’s brick and terra cotta exterior has been preserved, and its rooftop lounge restored with views of the Times Square ball. But there was nothing to save from the interior after years of being gutted.

Brown still travels to New York weekly, but his next big projects are back in Boston.

He is teamed up with developers Steve Samuels and Adam Weiner on a hotel-condo project in the Back Bay. It is the second project with Samuels and Weiner; last year, Brown helped them convert the Howard Johnson in the Fenway into the hip Verb hotel. Brown also worked with the Weiner family to open the Mandarin Oriental in the Back Bay.

If that weren’t enough, Brown is also part of a group vying to build a new convention center hotel in South Boston.

“I love Boston. I never wanted to leave,” said Brown, who grew up in England. But “to do a hotel in New York, how could you not?”

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The red Aston Martin parked in front of the Knickerbocker is available for guests’ use.

