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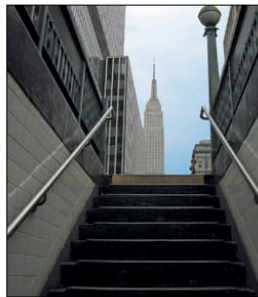
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September/October 2008

Going Up?

The Empire State Building is being restored to its former glory – and so are the staff uniforms.

By Jay Gordon



More than 10,000 people visit the Empire State Building's 102nd-floor observatory every day, making this fabled building one of New York City's largest tourist attractions. Another 5,000 people a day visit the building's office tenants.

That's a lot of opportunities to make a first impression.

Which is a big reason the building's owners recently launched a \$500 million facelift to help recapture the glory of this landmark, which was built in 1930 and is by far the oldest structure to appear in Top 10 lists of the world's tallest buildings.

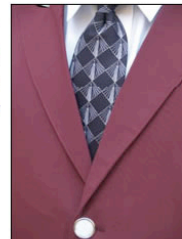
And in the true spirit of first impressions, the Empire State Building's huge renovation project includes an equally massive makeover for its staff uniforms. Gone is the "casual look" – polo shirts and cardigan sweaters – and in its place is a complete tailored uniform, featuring jackets and pants, shirts, custom-designed ties, hats, shoes and belts.

"We wanted to bring back a uniform that harkened back to the Art Deco design and elegance of the building," says Jim Connors, the building's general manager. "We wanted the staff to stand out, with a professional look that kept to the true aesthetic of the building."

Evidence that the new design met that criteria is abundant, from the deep burgundy colorway that is central to the new uniform program – custom-dyed to match the burgundy veining in the marble in the building's new lobby – to the custom-designed, trademarked ties that feature a stylized version of the building against a starburst pattern.

Connors is proud of the fact that the uniforms were designed and cut by another New York City icon – I. Buss-Allan Uniforms, the oldest continuously operating uniform shop in the city. Jennifer Busch, vice president and the lead designer for the fourth-generation company, says the new uniforms feature lots of other classic uniform touches:

- Cuffs on the jackets are black – but only on the top of the sleeve.
- Gray braid trim sets off the cuffs with a chevron, "a classic detail of the period," Busch says.
- Patches on the jackets and collared vests were also designed by Busch.
- Jackets feature peak lapels, also set off with gray braid.
- Hats come in summer (vented on top) and winter versions, and are designated for observatory and security staff with a custom-designed font. "Just having a hat is unique and 'retro,'" says Connors. "It gives the employees more height."



Custom-designed neckwear "ties" together the Art Deco theme that I. Buss relied on to inspire the Empire State Building's new uniform program. "We hope we can develop these in additional colorways, and we plan to sell them in our gift shop," says General Manager Jim Connors.



One of the classic Art Deco design touches is the cuffs on the jacket – black top sleeve and burgundy underneath, with gray trim at the edge of the pointed cuff.

"These are unique features that draw additional attention to the uniforms and speak to the care with which they were designed," he adds. "We have 250 people in uniform, and they have thousands of customer interactions each day. It was important to create a consistent look, from the street all the way through to the observatory. We were looking for a quality guest service, and the look and feel of the staff is a big part of that."

Made to measure

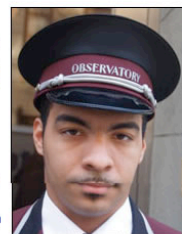
Each employee's uniform "par" consists of 11 shirts (six long-sleeve, five short-sleeve), four pairs of pants, three jackets or vests, ties, shoes and belts. Except for the ticket office staff, everyone wears a hat, and those who work outside receive a custom overcoat for colder weather. Transitioning from a basic polo and slacks to a full-blown custom uniform program created a challenge for the Empire State Building in terms of storing all those garments, but the solution it designed was no less creative than the uniforms themselves.

Each uniform was made to measure. Busch's father, Stuart, personally measured and fitted each employee. The uniforms are rented on a three-year agreement, with most garments expected to last the life of the contract. "We are one of the few companies – maybe the only company – that will rent a custom uniform," says Busch.

The contract is turnkey, and in addition to the initial fittings, I. Buss also maintains a minimum of 20% "attic stock" at all times so that existing items can be replaced, or new employees outfitted. I. Buss is also responsible for cleaning and repairs. It's a good thing the Empire State Building is only 10 blocks away from the I. Buss shop. "We go to the building at least twice a week to pick up and drop off the dry cleaning and bring the repairs back here. We have two tailors at the studio all the time, so we can do repairs here and have the garment back in less than a week. I can even knock out a jacket myself in a few days if we need to."

A touch of ... glam?

Employees began wearing the new uniforms about three months ago. "It was a big change," says Connors, and to be frank, some of the employees looked out of sorts – not entirely comfortable. But then visitors began making positive comments, and Connors got letters from tenants saying how sharp the staff looked. "[Employees] saw the type of respect and attention they garnered, and in a matter of days they realized that the uniforms had really elevated them in terms of prestige," Connors says. "It's almost a glamorous thing, and it enhances the story we were trying to tell. Our people now have a unique uniform that looks like it belongs in the building, and as a result, they have a stature now they did not have in the past."



Hats come in summer (vented on top) and winter versions, and designate Observatory or Security staff. A graphic designer even created a font for the lettering – another custom element that sets the uniform program apart.

Where to store it all?

General Manager Jim Connors calls the uniform makeover at the Empire State Building "one of the most significant uniform undertakings in the city," and one of the reasons he says that is because of the sheer volume of garments it involved. At nearly 20 garments per employee, there are some 5,000 items to look after.

"The logistics were bigger than we realized at first," says Connors, "and we found ourselves asking, 'How are we going to house all this stuff?'"

He still recalls how project planners first came to him and said the voluminous new uniform program would create a need to triple the size of both the men's and women's locker rooms provided for employees to change. The price tag? In the neighborhood of \$1 million.

Connors figured there had to be a better way, and so his project team researched automated uniform room systems that track and store uniforms based on radio frequency identification (RFID) tags sewn into each garment. Eventually, the Empire State Building settled on a system similar to those used in casino uniform rooms.

Employees activate the system – housed in the sub-grade near the existing locker rooms – with their employee ID card, and the system delivers that employee's uniform to a door where the employee accesses only his garments. The system includes two "rigs," one for observatory employees and one for security personnel, while a third door allows employees to drop off soiled uniform components in bar-coded bags. One staff person loads the two rigs with the cleaned uniforms and also prepares updated inventory reports.

"We know where everything is all the time: what's on site, what's being cleaned and what's in the shop for repairs," says Connors, "and we saved 80% of what it would have cost to renovate the locker rooms."