

Architect redesigns with the times

Cetra/Ruddy adapts expertise as market dictates; from zoos to banks

BY ARI KAPLAN

SOON AFTER THE TIGER MOUNTAIN exhibit at the Bronx Zoo opened last year, scores of companies got postcards bearing images of the striped stars of the

show, along with the tag line, "When our clients roar, we listen."

The cards came from the exhibit's architect, SoHo-based Cetra/Ruddy Inc., which has built a burgeoning business not just by listening to clients but also, and more important, by paying attention to broader market trends. In fact, one of the most unusual features of the firm is that its clients have ranged from zoos to investment banks, and its projects from interior renovations to high-rise

residential towers.

In a business as cyclical as architecture, Cetra/Ruddy has distinguished itself by an ability to have expertise in the field of the moment.

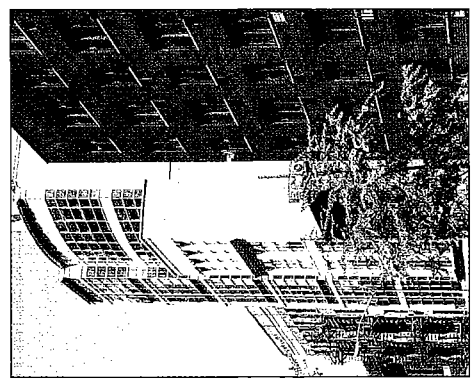
Flexible plans

"Diversity has always been our strength," says Nancy Ruddy. She notes that as one market slows down, the other parts of the practice pick up the slack.

Today, with the residential mar-

ket the flavor of the moment, the firm founded 17 years ago by Ms. Ruddy and her husband, John Cetra, is prospering as never before. Its list of recent projects includes a 10-story residential tower at 211 W. 18th St. that opened this month. Meanwhile, construction has just begun on its 60-story, 550-unit residential tower on West 42nd Street.

Cetra/Ruddy is also active in Brooklyn's Dumbo section, where a 23-story, 79-unit condominium building is under construction.



BUILDING A REPUTATION: 211 W. 18th

St. is a recent Cetra/Ruddy project.

“They understand the market,” says Andy Gerring, a managing director at real estate broker Douglas Elliman in Manhattan.

To support that flurry of activity, Cetra/Ruddy has doubled its space in the past two years and nearly doubled its staff as well, to a current 31 architects and seven interior designers—spread across a wide range of specialties. Revenues in that period have grown by nearly 25% to reach over \$6 million.

After graduating from the City University of New York’s architecture program in the late 1970s, the duo spent a decade separately honing their craft on large-scale commercial and residential projects at several prominent firms.

Once they joined forces, starting out in a tiny sublet above a fortune cookie factory in Chinatown, the duo did what they could. Early projects ranged from the renovation of a student dormitory at a small school in Rockland County, to the interior design for a 75,000-square-foot office for a small Wall Street investment company.

Back to school

By 1990, just as the firm was hitting its stride with residential projects and commercial interiors, the real estate market crashed. Having also done work for non-profits, Cetra/Ruddy quickly shifted its emphasis to building on those contacts. In 1991, for example, it designed the renovation of two small buildings at Columbia University.

By the end of the decade, with Wall Street roaring again, Cetra/Ruddy began mining its downtown contacts. For investment bank Keefe Bruyette & Woods, the firm designed a lavish 100,000-square-foot headquarters at the World Trade Center, a project that won the Society of American Registered Architects’ Interior Design Award.

True to form, even as their business designing apartment towers booms, Cetra/Ruddy continues to push its other disciplines. Its interiors team has just completed a 175,000-square-foot project for the New York City Department of Finance. And as one of relatively few certified wildlife specialist designers, Cetra/Ruddy is also doing more work for the Bronx Zoo, including a new butterfly house, and even an insect-themed carousel.

“Having a diversity of building types provides a safety net against downturns,” says Rick Bell, executive director of the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects. ■