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By Kirsten Nelson, 9.20.2006

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The Plaza Hotel on Central Park South in New York City is an address synonymous with a luxurious world where the needs of clientele are effortlessly met. Soon, the property's complete renovation will further that reputation with electronic enhancements to its stellar service. As always, guests will feel right at home, while an advanced network infrastructure carries their requests around the building and beyond, all at the touch of a button.

The Plaza is one of those few elite landmarks that define what is enduring and best in our great city, explained Miki Naftali, president of Elad Properties, the owner of the Plaza. We are building on its legacy while setting new standards of quality, luxury, and sophistication. We are also discretely but completely overhauling the infrastructure, introducing state-of-the-art systems and technology to assure purchasers, visitors, and guests the highest level of comfort and convenience within the castle on the park.

Truly, the entertainment and control systems that will be installed in each and every newly constructed unit of the Plaza are almost as dazzling as its glamorous clientele. A lot of people have asked about clientele, noted Steve Babel, owner of Concierge Direct, the systems integration firm tasked with modernizing the hotel rooms, condos and private residences at the Plaza. Obviously we can't disclose whos in the building, but when people ask if theres any movie stars, we tell them that the Plaza is the movie star. It gets a lot of attention.

In the sometimes intense spotlight of public expectations for this beloved landmark, the Concierge Direct team will work over the next year and a half to provide audiovisual, lighting, and control systems for nearly 200 residential units. Several of the latter have been purchased in pairs or even four or five units, creating at least one 11,000-plus-square-foot residence in the building. That is really a custom job, Babel said. But we have a team that will handle that.

The task at hand is certainly not for the faint of heart, and Concierge Direct has already demonstrated that it is a very rare type of company, equipped to handle the Plaza project in addition to its other, similar high-end condo projects in the New York area.

As the MDU market picks up the pace, sheer volume may convince many systems integrators that it is worth investigating. But the differences between single-family residences and high-rises, townhouses, and hotels are not just in the numbers. While a single installer may work on two or three homes for a single client before moving on to the next customer relationship, in the MDU world, relationships span years or even decades, and the completed build-outs total in the hundreds or thousands. Whats more, the capital investment at the front end of such a project can be monumental. An integrators reputation hinges not only on whether they can get the job done on time, but also on the reliability and ease of use of the products they install.

In the last two years the MDU market has suddenly gone from zero to crazy, observed Richard Stoerger, vice president and COO at ADA, which boasts products in the Plaza installation. Its a really exciting market, but it brings to bear a lot of intricacies for custom installers. They really need to set up an operation that is different from your standard custom A/V installer because youre looking to stage and install many systems all in one fell swoop or in stages. Furthermore, in terms of costs and buildings that are looking to get their certificate of occupancy, if a custom installer makes a mistake and holds up the entire project, each day could be not just an inconvenience but could cost the builder tens of thousands of dollars for each lost day.

Successful ventures into the MDU market depend on a careful balance of sales, manpower, scheduling, and financial wizardry. That balance can be difficult to achieve, observed David Humphries, principal of Thea and Schoen Integrated Systems, a manufacturers rep firm which handles several of the product lines going into the Plaza and numerous other MDU projects in the New York area. In the residential world, the companies have the expertise and the lines to do it, but they dont have the size to handle a project the size of a commercial project. On the other side of the coin, a commercial A/V firm can handle a project of that size but they dont have residential lines.

Planning for MDU projects is certainly on a scale somewhat familiar to those in the commercial realm, but residential systems manufacturers might not be equipped to handle a sudden spike in the quantity required by a dealer. Fortunately for Concierge Direct, the planning stage for the Plaza averages about 18 months, which gives

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Babel and Humphries plenty of time to negotiate product arrival with vendors. Additionally, plenty of projections and planning are required to ensure that Plaza residents are getting the latest, greatest models from the constantly evolving product spectrum. Humphries puts it succinctly: If you're spending \$50 million, you don't want to read in the paper that there's a better model number than the one going into your unit.

Fortunately, the particular needs of high-net-worth individuals are not at all foreign to Babel. In the late 1970s, he started jury-rigging security systems to accomplish all sorts of home automation functions for his clients. When residential control systems arrived on the market, Babel was an early adopter and a new business model was born. We realized that a control system should be the primary system, and the security, lighting, heating and air conditioning which are typically primary systems to a contractor now became subsystems.

Magnify those individual needs by the massive quantity of systems to be installed at the Plaza, and you have a challenge like few others. But again, Concierge Direct is ready. Apparently, it's all in the manpower. Ask Babel how his 16 staff members are going to make such a large number of elite clientele happy and he'll tell you that the answer is in partnering with union labor. At the Plaza, IBEW Local 3 firms will be assisting the Concierge Direct team from start to finish.

In New York City, working around the unions is really not an option. So Concierge Direct has learned how to use their immense manpower to their advantage. Its electronic architecture, Babel explained. An architect doesn't pick up a hammer on a project, and in the same way we're finding that we're really not the hands-on guys anymore. What we're doing is we're designing and overseeing these systems going in.

Eschewing the usual A/V contractor approach, wherein groups of specialized employees handle audiovisual, security, lighting, and heating and air conditioning portions of the project, Concierge Direct simply sends project managers with all of that hands-on experience to guide the Local 3 union workers. They will not only pull wire, but they'll also install every single piece of the various systems at the Plaza and coordinate with other union labor on things like HVAC. This unified approach eliminates the fragmentation of ideas and power that often comes with subcontracted labor. With a union, everyone's going in the same direction, Babel said. It's handled on a very large scale, but a controlled scale.

Concierge Direct has three project managers dedicated to the Plaza project. From start to finish, they will be managing the design process as drawings and specifications bounce back and forth between clients, engineering firms, electricians, architects, and interior designers. Documentation on a project of this scale is of a scope rarely seen in the residential world, but Concierge Direct has developed an efficient system, to make work at the Plaza flow smoothly. After clients have closed on their unit (or units), they visit the Concierge Direct sales center on the premises and select their technology upgrades. As soon as the resultant specifications are approved, the units are pre-wired and rough-in brackets are installed. Back at the Concierge Direct headquarters in New Rochelle, New York, an equipment rack is assembled and assigned a barcode. It will then be programmed, tested, and burned in before it is put into storage at Concierge Direct's Long Island City facility (right across the East River from Midtown Manhattan) in anticipation of completion of the unit to which it is assigned.

Construction at the Plaza is beginning on the top level and continuing downward, and Concierge Direct estimates that all of the hotel, condo, and residential units will turn over within a 90- to 120-day window. Even though that's a very small window to do all this, everything is installed, everything has been tested, the rack has already been tested and programmed, so all you're really doing is delivering the racks, plugging them in, turning them on, retesting them, and then you go onto the next one. It's not like doing it from scratch. We're about 90 percent complete prior to that 90- to 120-day closing period.

Helping to expedite this process is the fact that the A/V and lighting systems for the hotel rooms are standardized, as are the systems for the condo units. The residential units will require a more customized approach, but being owned outright by individuals, their timelines differ slightly as well.

With so many units turning over in such a short time frame, Concierge Direct needs to ensure that its various clients are familiar with their systems and thus prepared to use them immediately upon taking up residence at that Plaza. Typically in the A/V world, when a system is turned over to a client, at least 50 percent of the time, the client will ask for some new feature, Babel explained. We are trying very hard to eliminate that, so we're taking advantage of the next 12 months to interact with these clients. We're going to show them what their touchpanel interfaces look like and how it works. They're part of the building process.

For a significant portion of Plaza clientele, this will not be the first residence they will be outfitting with A/V and lighting systems, so they often arrive at the Concierge Direct sales office knowing very well what they want. Bearing this in mind, Concierge Direct has designed four system levels, all of which will be customized to meet the needs of individual clients. Even the Middle Atlantic equipment rack can be finished in a glossy coat or Mercedes White or other colors to match decor, and equipment faceplates can be custom finished in the same color.

The brands on the roster at the Plaza include ADA, Krell, Furman, Meridian, Kaleidescape, Denon, Runco, and Snell Acoustics, just to name a few. Lutron lighting and shade control will be used throughout. Concierge Direct worked with AMX to develop its MDU Amenities Solution, which provides the backbone for the entire facility. We were very selective about the brands we were offering, based upon reliability and reputation, Babel said.

Of course, system performance is critical, and every precaution will be taken to ensure perfect sound, video, lighting, and control. To keep things running smoothly, Furman power conditioning, surge protection, and UPS systems will be employed. Even though some customers may not be able to see the really fine detail in a digital picture, as a result of using good power conditioning they do know that when the power goes out they lose memory and they can't use their systems when they come back on, noted Dave Keller, executive vice president of sales and marketing for Furman, so having a good battery backup system the importance of that they recognize. Or if a surge comes through either due to a storm or a power company glitch and they lose their expensive equipment, they recognize the value of that as well. These clients are discerning, and they want to have the very best that's maintenance free.

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Concierge Directs director of operations, Nick DeClemente, emphasized that his firm looks to companies like Furman to isolate grounds and condition the power to make sure there's no noise at all in their systems. These clients look, and listen for quality, especially when they pay the kind of money that they paid for it, so we need to make sure that the system performs to the highest level, he said.

Real estate is, of course, at a premium in New York City, so Concierge Direct has developed an under-bed lift for plasma displays among other space-saving innovations. Specifically, ADAs HTR2400 multi-room system, with its slim 5RU form factor, was an ideal option.

In spite of space limitations, the amenities available to Plaza guests and residents at the touch of a button are nearly limitless. Concierge Direct has worked to develop a customized approach to its MDU Amenities Solution. The result is the Concierge Direct Lifestyle Amenities System, which will provide a vast array of conveniences, including video on demand, housekeeping and tech support, concierge services, and food and beverage delivery.

If a guest or resident's needs are not being met, the Concierge Direct MDU Amenities Solution allows the situation to be escalated according to a specified workflow. If a request is not acknowledged within a specific timeframe, Concierge Direct's 24-hour call center takes charge of the situation. For technical issues, Concierge Direct will also employ a full-time service tech who will live on the premises. This is what's different from a lot of MDU systems out there, Babel said. If the vendor does not respond to a request, the system would have no value, no one would use it.

Concierge Direct will maintain contracts with the various Plaza vendors, and discontinue relationships with those which do not perform to pre-set standards. No one is really doing anything like this at this scale, said Scott Norder, executive vice president of business development for AMX. There are a lot of companies out there that are just getting into this MDU business, but by no means is it a standard in the industry. The system will have a programmed chain of command all the way through so that Concierge Direct can make sure that requests are being fulfilled in a timely basis, and if they're not that they can escalate.

If there's one thing Concierge Direct's experience with clientele of this nature has brought them, it's the chance to take technology to a new level, and the Plaza is no exception. Our clientele have always pushed us to think this way to be very forward thinking and cutting edge, Babel said, hardly flinching when he considers the scale of this project. If you think about it, in the construction world, this happens every day. Massive buildings are constructed in cities all around the world every day, and this is the same type of process. Only instead of steel and sheetrock and plumbing, we're bringing in technology.

Kirsten Nelson is editor at large for Systems Contractor News.

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