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Historic club renovations aim for 'invisibility'

BY TIM MORAN

In the world of New York athletics, there are *clubs* and then there are *clubs*. The former can be found in every neighborhood in the city. They can be small and crowded. Often, they're individual franchises in a larger chain. Hardly ever would one refer to them as beautiful and certainly not historic (though the equipment is sometimes ancient).

Then there are the clubs—the Harmonic, Union and Racquet and Tennis Clubs of the world. These grand private facilities come complete with squash courts, spas, luxurious locker rooms and formal dining rooms. Many of these members-only affairs are housed in Landmark buildings dating from an urban private club boom in the 1920s and 1930s. They are places where maintaining tradition is a top priority. That said, this is the 21st century and the needs of the club members have changed.

make unnecessary changes," he said. "You also don't tend to want to change the formal spaces, such as foyers and lounges... Design success is defined by preservation of the original architecture and incorporation of new work that meets new demands, while seamlessly extending the building's existing interior."

What kind of work can this include? At Harmonic Club on E 60th Street—a Landmark building constructed in 1905—Kratchman converted the existing "men's spa" into a spa accessible to both men and women by creating co-ed entry and reception areas for spa access.

At Racquet and Tennis Club, a Landmarked club

"It's an entirely different world in terms of the demographics of the clubs, first off," said architect Steven Kratchman, AIA, whose firm Steven Kratchman Architect, P.C., has undertaken many club renovations recently. "First off, many of the private clubs in New York were designed as men-only facilities. They need to be updated to equally accommodate women."

Add to this the need for handicapped accessibility, a change in squash court sizes from the North American standard to the longer International standard and the natural and inevitable need to update old buildings and you have a unique architectural challenge. According to Kratchman, the key is to be all but invisible.

"Many of these clubs, such as Racquet and Tennis Club are landmarked, so the key is you don't want to—and are not allowed to—



Renovation of the Racquet and Tennis Club on Park Avenue, a registered Historic Landmark, included facade and window work as well as a new Master Plan for the 80,000 s/f interior.

built in 1917 and located on Park Avenue, Kratchman designed a new Master Plan for the interior of the 80,000 s/f building, converting three North American squash courts, which measure 18.5' x 32', into two International squash game courts, which measure 21' x 32'. Second-story windows and frames were also carefully reinsulated to increase energy efficiency.

At Union Club, on E 69th Street—built in 1931 and located within the Upper East Side Historic District—Kratchman also converted North American courts to International courts. In addition, he designed a new Pro Shop and a new racquet and storage system that utilized moving cabinets similar to those used for files at many law firms to reduce the

area needed to store equipment. Kratchman said such reductions are important.

"These are urban clubs and every square inch is accounted for," he said. "The less space you use for storage, the more you can use for services that will be of benefit to club members."

While updating facilities is important, Kratchman said it is just as important that an architect respect club traditions and work to maintain the historic nature of these institutions.

"These clubs represent some of the best architecture in the city from that time period. You don't want to try and work against them," Kratchman said. "If I do my job right, no one will notice my team was ever there. The work will blend right in."