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Want to Generate Buzz For Your Building? Have a Kanye Party

Skylight Studios finds underused buildings with character to serve as the backdrop for shows and marketing events

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For a Kanye West performance in Brooklyn, N.Y., Skylight offered the Williamsburgh Savings Bank tower, a landmarked condominium building. PHOTO: JUSTIN LANE/ EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY

Call it creative real estate.

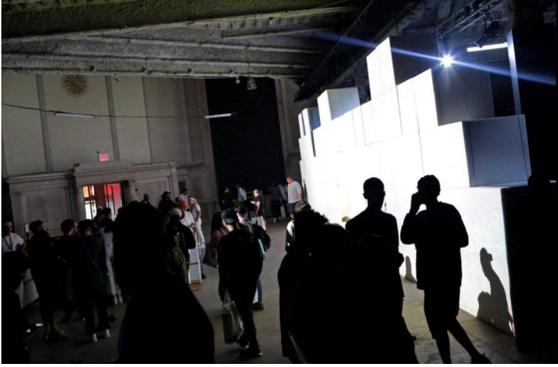
Skylight Studios has built a business finding distinctive but underused buildings in New York to serve as the backdrop for shows and marketing events for brands such as Nike and Ralph Lauren.

The events are fleeting—ranging from a week to a few hours—but they also fuel the other part of Skylight’s business: helping landlords gain exposure to their spaces.

In a tough retail environment and a competitive office market, landlords are jockeying for attention. Events by high-profile companies bring influential attendees—the kinds of tastemakers, celebrities and executives who can help attract potential tenants.

The events reach other audiences through images posted on social media platforms, trendy blogs and magazine sites such as Vogue and Architectural Digest that live on digitally long after the event is over. The creative uses of the space also help market the buildings.

"In my job marketing commercial real estate, one of the most difficult things is to get prospective tenants to visualize raw space," said Sara Fay, head of marketing for L&L Holding Company LLC, which has worked with Skylight to bring in events at its properties. "The more material I have to show how the space can be used and how it can be activated is a home run for me."



A Nike fashion event in one of Skylight's locations in New York last week. Skylight secures underused spaces for creative events that help market the buildings where they are held. PHOTO: YANA PASKOVA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Skylight got its start in 2004 and historically has focused on properties in transition, buildings with an interesting history or architecture often awaiting development financing or approvals to move forward. At Iron Works on West 25th Street, where Skylight brought in a Nike event as well as other fashion presentations, building owner L&L has been in the process of allowing office leases to expire so it can open up large blocks of space and attract higher-caliber tenants.

In the past year, Skylight has been expanding its role as a strategic adviser to building owners and developers, connecting them to partners or organizations who can bring events and help shape a building's identity, said Chief Executive Stephanie Blake.

Developer Forest City New York has tapped Skylight's experience and brand connections to make the Bridge, its commercial office building on the Cornell Tech's new Roosevelt Island campus, into a destination. The first phase is set to open this week.

These days, short-term pop-up shops have grown as a way for landlords to fill empty storefronts that have proliferated in Manhattan shopping corridors as a result of skyrocketing rents and retail chains cutting back on stores.



An attendee looked at a Nike shoe at the brand's event held in one of Skylight's spaces at 23 Wall St. PHOTO: YANA PASKOVA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Skylight's approach is a new version of an old concept of showcasing real estate and generating buzz with some form of entertainment, said Adelaide Polsinelli, senior managing director at Eastern Consolidated.

The buildings range from elaborately decorated spaces to cavernous, industrial buildings such as the massive former warehouse facility known as St. John's Terminal. The site, which is called Skylight Clarkson Sq. and has served as a venue for the continuing New York Fashion Week, is slated to become a mixed-use development including office, retail and residential space.

For a Kanye West performance, Skylight was able to offer Fort Greene's Williamsburgh Savings Bank tower, a landmarked condominium building with a first floor interior showing off numerous types of Italian marble, gold-leaf decoration and mosaics. The company also has brought runway shows and Nike and Microsoft launches to the James A. Farley Post Office, establishing buzz around its new name, Moynihan Station.

"People buy into the idea of what was the history of this place and how can you actually make that as part of our brand message," Ms. Blake said. "I think you are seeing that a lot with fashion in particular because they are challenged a lot in terms of retail. So how can they get their consumers to buy into a story, to want to be loyal to their brand?"

The bare, raw interiors of 23 Wall St., the landmarked neoclassical former headquarters of J.P. Morgan & Co., gave Nike the canvas it needed for its series of discussions and multimedia displays of designer Virgil Abloh's reinventions of 10 of the brand's well-known styles this past week. Nike estimated about 7,500 consumers would attend panels and events.

"We're bringing eyeballs to the property," said Jack Terzi, chief executive of JTRE Holdings, which is in contract to purchase the building.

Skylight's team has been grappling with the loss of its founder Jennifer Blumin since May, when a plane carrying her and her two young sons was lost over the Bermuda Triangle.



The interior of 23 Wall St., the Skylight space where the Nike event for designer Virgil Abloh was held last week. PHOTO: SKYLIGHT

Ms. Blake recalled one exploratory site visit when Ms. Blumin's passion for unearthing forgotten places was on display. Ms. Blumin had crawled and climbed over beams and under ledges to emerge dust-covered but "victorious" atop a derelict roof structure. The team has been trying to honor her legacy by pushing the company's vision to the next level, Ms. Blake said.

"There's that sense of missing a friend and someone to share all the challenges and share this vision that became our vision," Ms. Blake said. "We always talked about where this vision could continue beyond buildings. Is it corridors, neighborhoods, islands, campuses, cities?"