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New Residence Hall Opens

"It's clean, it's new...
and the gym and
laundromat make
life so much easier."

Christine Evangelista,
Fashion Merchandising Management '08

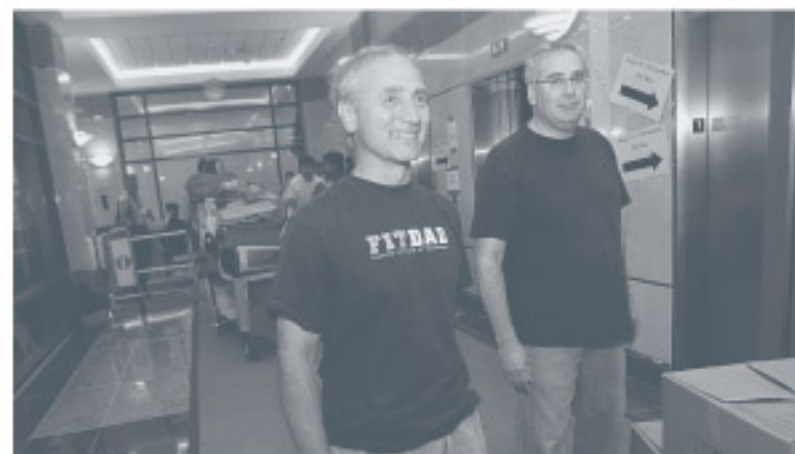
"I say it's a luxury high-rise," Ann Marie Grappo, director of Residential Life, tells a group of Student Affairs staff members gathered for a tour of the college's new residence hall at 406 West 31st Street. And she isn't the only one who thinks this way.

"I love it," says Christine Evangelista, a third-year student in Fashion Merchandising Management from Staten Island who shares a double room on the ninth floor. "It's clean, it's new...and the gym and the laundromat make life so much easier. P.S.," she adds, "the showers are huge." Jennifer Liu, a second-year FMM student from Bayside, Queens, is similarly impressed. "It's very, very spacious," she says of the triple she shares on the third floor. "It's really big, and everything is brand new."

As returning undergraduates with homes in the city's five boroughs, Evangelista and Liu would once have been ineligible for campus housing. But the 31st Street Residence Hall, which opened in August, changed all that. With 1,100 beds, the 15-story building raises FIT's capacity for resident students to 2,300, allowing the college to rescind its "35-mile rule," which offered campus housing only to students who lived beyond that distance.

The building's residents have just about everything they need on site. There's a cyber lounge with 16 computers and high-speed internet access (WiFi is on the way); a gym stocked with elliptical machines, treadmills, and full-body workout equipment; a laundry room with 36 washers and dryers; 24-hour lobby security; and a range of one-, two-, three-, and four-bed suites, each with its own bathroom and kitchenette. As an added bonus, many suites feature spectacular views of the Manhattan skyline and the Hudson River.

As one might expect, the influx of 1,100 new residents has had an impact on local businesses. Walk past the New Victory Diner on Ninth Avenue between West 30th and 31st streets, and right next to the sign for homemade yogurt, you'll see one announcing a ten-percent discount for FIT students. Just next door, Swart's NYC Cleaners offers students twenty percent off dry cleaning and wash-and-fold services. "Every day, some new FIT customers come," says manager Sam Hong, who emphasizes the mutual benefits of the discount program. "I help the students, and the students help me," he says.



Above: FIT students move into their new home at 406 West 31st Street.
Below: Fathers eager to move their children into the new residence;
and FIT Student Ambassadors welcome new students.

The 31st Street Residence Hall has also had an impact on Residential Life. "We've doubled our population, so we've had to double the staffing," Grappo says. The new building is equipped with its own Residential Life office and a full complement of building managers, resident counselors, and resident assistants. The idea, says Grappo, is to ensure that the students feel connected to the larger FIT community just a few blocks away. "We sometimes refer to it as our 'uptown' building, but the goal is to make it seem like a seamless program," she says. For example, the graduate students and returning undergraduates who live at 31st Street receive the same online orientation program that all other students in campus housing enjoy. "Just because they're returning students doesn't mean they shouldn't be included."

Grappo says students enjoy living with a mixed graduate/undergraduate population in a hall that feels like an apartment building, yet has Residential Life staff in place to help deal with any problems or personal conflicts that may arise.

"They feel independent, but if they need assistance, they know where they can get it," she says. And if they need a workout, some clean clothes, or a fast internet connection, they can get those, too.

Signs. They're all around us, yet we tend not to think much about them until we're hopelessly lost. Or desperately trying to find an elevator, an exit, or a restroom.

Signs are crucial, however, in helping people to navigate everything from highways to theme parks. And aside from guiding travelers from here to there—something signage professionals refer to as "wayfinding"—signs also help to identify and brand physical spaces, forming an important component of their overall environmental design.

All of these factors underlay FIT's decision to develop a master signage planning document that would include all of the exterior and interior signs on campus—from the ones announcing that you are about to enter a particular building to those that help you find the elevators once you're inside. "Our goal is to have a comprehensive master signage plan in place by May 2007, the end of the academic year," says Loretta Lawrence Keane, vice president for Communications and External Relations, and chair of the signage working group of the Marketing Communications Advisory Committee. (The signage working group includes faculty, students, and administrators, all of whom will provide input on the final plan.)

Work on the master plan began in 2005 in partnership with Pentagram, a multi-disciplinary international design firm with expertise in environmental and identity design. In addition to redesigning the college's print materials several years ago, Pentagram has undertaken a number of small, isolated signage projects around campus. Most recently, the firm helped design new temporary signage for The Museum at FIT. Now Pentagram is working closely with the college to develop a plan that will encompass the entire campus and all of its buildings. "Right now, FIT's signs are inconsistently designed and inconsistently installed," Michael Bierut, a partner in Pentagram's New York office, observes, "so our assignment is to come up with a plan to coordinate new signs for the whole campus, both inside and out, old buildings and new. Once the plan is in place, we'll work with FIT to prioritize the needs and figure out what signs should be installed in what order."

Even from a straightforward wayfinding perspective, the FIT campus presents a series of unique challenges. "As everyone who spends time here knows, FIT is very different from your image of a typical college campus," Bierut notes. "It's right in the middle of a busy part of a busy city, the architecture is a hodgepodge, and the flow of people is hectic and unpredictable. And let's be honest, these are actually some of the things—especially the connection with New York City—that make the campus great. But still, it can be confusing and unwelcoming to visitors, and it needs to feel more integrated."

In addition, most of the college's buildings are physically connected to one another, and existing signage tends to be both incomplete and inconsistent in its design. Depending upon where you happen to be, you might see a collection of signs in a variety of styles and fonts—if you see any at all. "You can get off an elevator and not know where you are. It's a rite of passage," Keane says wryly. According to Josh Berta, a Pentagram designer who worked on the signage for the museum, students eventually come to understand the physical layout of the campus "in a very personal way." Visitors, however, are not so lucky. Consequently, Keane has from the outset kept two different constituencies in mind when considering the master signage plan: The FIT community itself, made up of students, faculty, and staff; and the broader public, which includes prospective students, parents, alumni, and the many visitors and tourists who are drawn to the campus.

Raising FIT's public profile is, in fact, a major goal of the signage initiative. According to Keane, some visitors find the college's predominantly Brutalist architecture to be relatively uninviting. (Pioneered by the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, Brutalism was an offshoot of Modernist architecture that became extremely popular in the 1960s and 1970s.) As a result, the master signage plan is intended to advertise the college's presence in the city more effectively.

"Right now, I feel that FIT has too low a profile in New York's cultural



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