

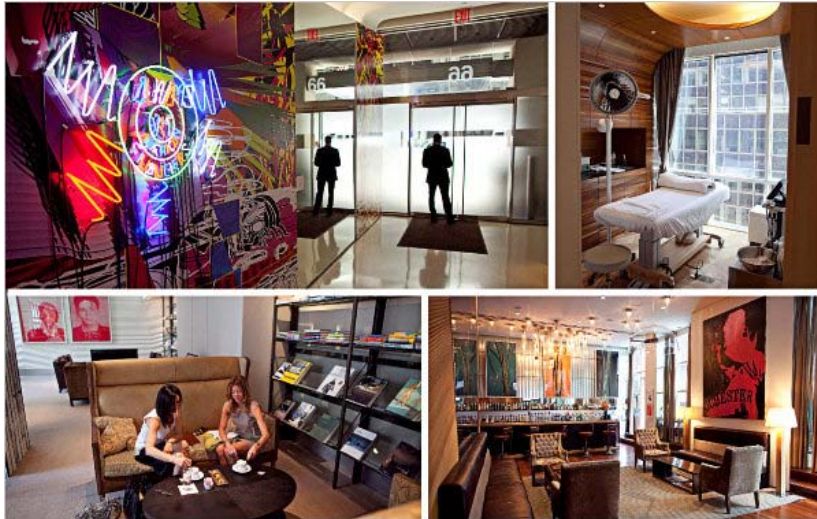
# FRED TORRES COLLABORATIONS

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## The New York Times



### In New York, Portals to Power

By Guy Trebay

SHE looked like money, the woman with the sleek long legs, tanned a light toast color, and with a mane highlighted by honeyed streaks conjured by some magician at Frédéric Fekkai.

Her suit was Chanel but emphatically not matronly Chanel. Her wrists were manacled with slave bracelets from Cartier. Her shoes were Manolo Blahniks because not only did she look like money, she was money. And women in her position, the early adopters of high-end acquisition, have shifted footwear allegiance lately, abandoning Christian Louboutin with his flashy, too-obvious red soles and returning to Mr. Blahnik, the cobbler who first brought the world a \$750 stiletto so comfortable a woman could wear hers to scale Mount Everest.

It was the handbag that told the story, of course, as a handbag often does. Taking a seat on a

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terrace table at lunch, the woman slung her purse onto an empty chair.

The bag, it almost goes without saying, was a Birkin from Hermès, the fastening straps left unclasped with accustomed and deliberate nonchalance. Not an ordinary Birkin, something basic and valued at \$10,000 in calf leather, the bag this woman threw around with a casualness that belied its value — a 40-centimeter model in single skin crocodile tinted a subtle brown — sells for about the price of a new Lexus sedan.

She ordered ... well, what does it matter what she ordered? As Marlene Dietrich once observed, New Yorkers (and particularly those of a certain social stratum) are hungry for everything except food. And for those New Yorkers and their kind, those used to breathing the rarefied air of great wealth, there is a particular gathering place in Manhattan, a quiet six-story annex of a Midtown office building, unmarked and inconspicuous, where they can be among their kind. That place is the [Core club](#).

This private, members-only club on East 55th Street was created six years ago to serve as place where, The New York Times [reported before it opened in 2005](#), a geographically and socially diverse set of wealthy people might “gather and meet others of the same disparate tribe.”

It might surprise some to learn that, despite the battering the economy has taken since then, the tribe remains populous and robust. What tribe is it, exactly, and what is its composition? Unlike the traditional clubs in this city, bastions of exclusivity and homogeneity engineered to preserve a certain social order by keeping, as The Times also noted, “new and different people away,” the Core club is a democratic place.

It is open to all — or at least, in an essential way, to all those in the top 1 percent of United States households: families with earnings the Tax Policy Center estimates will be \$3,061,546 on average this year for a family of four, as well as those from an even more-elevated category that the nonpartisan, nonprofit group calls the “ultra rich.”

The estimated income this year for households occupying that particular niche — a mere 0.1

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percent of all United States households — will be \$13,719,746, according to the Tax Policy Center.

“The fat-cat hedge fund guys love the place,” said Richard David Story, the editor of *Departures*, the glossy travel magazine distributed to holders of American Express Platinum and Centurion cards. “These guys take their heartbeats per minute as seriously as they take their investment portfolios.” As putative fat cats, the club’s members, of which there are now 1,500, are presumably undaunted by the club’s \$50,000 initiation and \$15,000 annual fees.

“My other club is the Century,” said Mr. Story, referring to the [Century Association](#), a private club established in 1847 by the editor William Cullen Bryant and his friends to promote the fraternal (the club first admitted women, by court order, in 1989) pursuit of fine arts and literature. “This is a much younger, hipper crowd.”

Being ostensibly younger and possibly hipper but certainly richer and more unashamedly over-the-top than the literati and assorted members of the intelligentsia comprising the Century’s roster (Mark Twain termed the place “the most unspeakably respectable club in the United States”), Core club members are inured to the perks and entitlements of 21st-century wealth. Where many traditional New York clubs maintain strict dress codes and prohibit business meetings, cellphone conversations and the use of iPads or PDAs, the Core club at many times of the day resembles a trading floor.

“I’ve got a billion dollars to be deployed,” a member remarked to his lunch companion over a recent midday meal of \$22 Kobe beef sliders and \$36 plate of lobster salad with pea leaves and carrot coulis. “It’s there and we need to get it moved.”

At a nearby table, a woman who had spent the morning at the club spa sat querying her companion about her complexion. “Do I look scorched?” she said.

“I’m going to Vietnam with the kids,” the woman added, noting that for this particular trip the family would be taking the new Gulfstream VI.

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By no measure could the Core be mistaken for the other private clubs in a city that is well supplied with hideouts for the privileged. It is not, in other words, remotely like the Colony Club, that Park Avenue monument to all things ladylike and proper.

Nor does it resemble the stately Union, often described as the first private social club in the United States (it was founded in 1863); or the Metropolitan, founded in 1891 by a Vanderbilt, a Whitney and J. P. Morgan when a member of their coterie was denied admission to the Union; or any of the other local institutions like the Harmonie or the Brook clubs, with exclusive membership policies and facilities vaguely modeled after Boodle's or White's, stuffy but venerable bolt-holes for English gentlemen.

While other local clubs may offer members well-waxed and cigar-scented havens burnished by custom and softened by wear, the Core club revels in the shiny aura of the newly arrived. In place of overstuffed armchairs squared off at the perimeter of Oriental rugs, private humidors and afternoon teas, the club features an extensive art collection on loan from its members, including a rotating roster of lobby installations, most recently a hallucinatory vinyl mural by Assume Vivid Astro Focus and David LaChapelle's photographs of the transgender vision Amanda Lepore.

"It's a quintessentially American conceit," said Paul Austin, referring to Core club ethos, one easy to equate with the gold digger's recipe for marrying money: mingle with the rich and marry for love.

Mr. Austin is a director of the Austin Advisory Group, consultants to the fragrance and fashion industries. He is also — like Steven Roth, the chairman and chief executive of Vornado Realty Trust, and Stephen A. Schwarzman, the chairman of the Blackstone Group, and Aby Rosen, the real estate mogul, and Ari Emanuel, a chief executive of William Morris Endeavor Entertainment, and J. Christopher Burch, a venture capitalist, and Patricia Kluge, the multimillionaire divorcée-turned-vintner — one of the founding members of the Core club, people who anted up an initial investment of \$100,000 when the club was conceived.

"In a more traditional gentlemen's club, even bringing out a piece of paper, let alone a cellphone, is looked down on," Mr. Austin said. "Here people are very much encouraged to network, to have

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working meals.”

The Core club “does a strong power lunch,” said Pablo De Ritis, the club’s cultural curator. For that matter, it does a strong power breakfast, power cocktails and power tea. The latter is often taken in the club’s stylish library or in a conference dining room fitted out with state-of-the-art teleconferencing technology, along with a secret entrance and private stairway to accommodate members who travel with security details.

“You’re not going to find an unhappy person in the Core club,” said Jennie Saunders, the founder of the Core Group, the club’s parent company. “If someone on the staff is having a bad day, an off day, we tell them to stay home,” Ms. Saunders added, over a power breakfast that she likes to take standing up and with her laptop perched on a ledge. “We don’t have negative energy entering the Core club universe. And there is an acute awareness of the need to execute the right judgment at all times.”

Recently, when a bartender’s judgment faltered and the club ran out of one member’s favorite imported beer, Ms. Saunders ran to a nearby specialty shop and bought a six-pack herself.

“It’s a 24/7 service business,” she said, as she conducted this reporter to the sixth-floor spa. There, according to its operator, the former Dangene McKay-Bailey (she recently altered her surname to Enterprise), a fair number of Core club members start each day. “We have a publishing executive who comes every day before the gym and work for a little tune-up,” Ms. Enterprise noted, referring to the tools of her trade: dermabrasion, Fraxel laser, ultrasound treatment that purportedly infuses [stem cells](#) into aging skin. “Why not? In his business you have to look good.”

And if a blemish should happen to emerge on a member’s expensively maintained surface, said Talya Taylor, a spa therapist, the Dangene crew is at the ready with skin-care triage: “In an emergency, if someone calls us and says, ‘I’m going to pop this pimple myself if you don’t see me,’ we get them right in.”

As in seemingly all places frequented by the new rich, art is a central Core club theme, there in the

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ostentatiously bogus wood paneling commissioned for the club library from the artist Richard Wood; there in works hung throughout the club by artists as disparate as Alexander Calder, Andy Warhol, David Salle and Richard Prince; there in a vaguely sinister light installation placed in the elevator by Leo Villareal; and there in “Flood,” a great tsunami of red pigment by Barnaby Furnas that hangs above the bar.

“There are less rules than traditional clubs” at the Core club, Beth Rudin DeWoody, the art collector and philanthropist, said last week by telephone from South Africa, where she was traveling to seek out big game and new art.

“Like anything that happens in New York, you gather people and you network,” Ms. DeWoody added. “But it’s also just a nice place in Midtown to relax during the middle of the day when you don’t have time to go home and change.”

A visitor to the Core club could be forgiven for thinking that few members squander much time relaxing and that each encounter there is a fixed point in the arc of a potential deal. “Time optimization is part of the DNA of the Core club,” said Ms. Saunders, an intense woman who grew up in Yonkers, where her father, a Sicilian immigrant, earned the money to pursue a dental degree by driving a garbage truck.

Cultural “optimization” is also a part of the club’s makeup; anyway, there is an amorphous operative notion that members share what Mr. DeRitis, the cultural curator, calls a “sensibility.”

What that amounts to may not be clear, although as at even the most fuddy-duddy of institutions, the Core club does arrange special member nights on Broadway, imports guest speakers (the Jets head coach Rex Ryan was one), stages movie screenings at its luxurious private theater and offers a Father’s Day brunch.

Before being approached to join the Core club, Irwin D. Simon, the chief executive officer of Hain Celestial Group, the natural foods empire, took a Groucho Marx view of club membership. “The Met, the Harvard Club, the Harmonie, I never joined,” and never wanted to, he said. “At those

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other clubs, you had to know the same people and have gone to the same schools. The Core club felt different and not at all stodgy.”

At the Core club, members have things more unusual in common than Mayflower bloodlines or shared memories of freshman year at Deerfield. They have what the woman with the crocodile Birkin would seem to, an almost cartoonish relationship to conspicuous consumption and the unwavering conviction that Thorstein Veblen had it all wrong.

“At least three members I can think of offhand were interested in buying the Mets,” said Mr. DeRitis, citing James F. McCann, the founder of [1-800-Flowers.com](http://1-800-Flowers.com); Anthony Scaramucci, the manager of a \$7-billion hedge fund; and Steven A. Cohen, the hedge fund mogul who is currently both a front-runner to be the Mets’ new owner and under investigation by the S.E.C. “That pretty much says it all.”