



FROM LEFT: 100 ELEVENTH AVENUE FACADE DETAIL, 166 PERRY STREET PENTHOUSE EXTERIOR, 166 PERRY STREET FACADE DETAIL

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# STARARCHITECTURE RISING

JOSEPH GIOVANNINI LAUDS NEW YORK'S COOL NEW CONDOS.

It was about 1990, and a European businessman standing high in a Wall Street skyscraper overlooking Manhattan gestured with his hand to the city as it stretched north: "In ten years this will all be Geneva," he observed.

The gentleman worked in the financial industry, and he was predicting that the old city shaped by the industrial era, with its gritty character and funky neighborhoods, would transform under pressures brought by those galloping twins of change, the information age and New York's financial markets. Soon, he said, all the different districts left over from another time would merge into a continuous carpet of affluence from Uptown to Downtown, river to river. Traditional enclaves would be gentrified and absorbed into a new emerging socioeconomic fabric, and though neighborhoods would persist nominally, they would be distinguished by lifestyle rather than price. Districts would still differ in architectural character, but values everywhere would equalize. It would be a city of the affluent.

The prediction proved prescient, and in the fallout of the new New York order, there are many corollary phenomena, among them, the loosening of the monopolistic claim of Park Avenue, Fifth Avenue, Central Park West and a few other enclaves as Manhattan's prestige addresses. The crowds that a generation ago would have only considered these storied avenues are now also looking elsewhere, especially people driven by a pioneering curiosity and the romance of loft living.

Over the last five years, the change has been accelerated by boutique apartment buildings designed by famous, cutting-edge architects, who stamp their names and reputations on the structures, along with new forms of beauty. "Prestige" is no longer the operative adjective, "cool" is, and it is increasingly competitive, a result of design escalation. The old real estate adage "location, location, location" is giving way to "architect, architect, architect" in buildings that also offer special amenities, from a concierge at the door to a mirrored gym, perhaps even a pool, in the basement. These are one-of-a-kind, high-service luxury buildings, and there is nothing cookie-cutter about them.

The buildings—twenty now going on thirty—have turned Manhattan into a major, living architecture exhibition that could have been curated by MoMA. The architects are all modernists sharpening the edge of the profession, some of them making their reputations with buildings larger than they've ever done. The exhibition is outside the walls of

the museum, though, in the real world, and the designs are raising the architectural standards of neighborhoods that have seldom, if ever, been touched by world-class design.

It's happening everywhere in Manhattan, occurring conspicuously at the contemporary and gracious 170 East End Avenue by Peter Marino and spreading now to Brooklyn with glassy apartment blocks by Richard Meier. But the phenomenon started very famously at the corner of Perry Street and the West Side Highway in the West Village, where Meier built a shimmering glass tower that rapidly sold out to people like Martha Stewart and Nicole Kidman—to people, Greta Garbo might say, who wanted to be alone, or alone together. Many were also figures whose notoriety or nationality would not appeal to staid co-op boards, part of a larger paradigm shift from co-ops to condominiums.

Meier's project on Perry Street was famously successful, and developers noticed that even addresses well off the central spine of Manhattan attracted buyers willing to pay a premium for a building with the right amenities and aesthetic cachet. In a market where apartments are usually sold by simple square footage in association with an address, hiring a famous architect changed the rules of the game because it paid off. Soon Meier was asked to do a second tower right next to the first, and he is now completing a third next to that. Success bred success for a New York architect who had never built a tower in New York before—and almost nowhere else for that matter.

Meier's success became a template for other developers, who looked for architects with something new and fresh to say on the New York street and skyline. Hotelier Ian Schrager asked Gwathmey Siegel to design a curvaceous tower on Cooper Square, one which echoed a modernist classic conceived in the 1920s by Mies van der Rohe. André Balazs, another trendsetting hotelier, hired French architect Jean Nouvel to design a large block-to-block building in Soho, a highly literate steel-and-glass structure inspired by the surrounding cast-iron buildings of the historic district. Nouvel, himself a card-carrying member of the loft-loving '60s generation, is now designing a fascinating condominium with a pixilated facade of dislocated colored glass planes on the West Side Highway, next to Frank Gehry's billowing design for Barry Diller's InterActive Corporation building. Gehry himself is working in Brooklyn for the Ratner Company on a vast mixed-use complex that includes apartments, and he is also designing an apartment tower on Beekman Street that will exceed in height the neighboring Woolworth Building, once the world's tallest.



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166 PERRY STREET MAISONETTE

Gehry has successfully applied his artistic sensibility on a large scale in a building type where multiplication tables set the design agenda through tyrannies of the bottom line. The same is true for Meier, now completing the design of several apartment blocks just south of the United Nations building, along the East River, where he has layered glass railings over all-glass facades to generate a sensation of nearly subliminal shimmer.

Gwathmey, Meier, Gehry and Nouvel are among the best-established figures in the roster, the most prominent of the "starchitects," but part of the architectural connoisseurship in the new enterprise is the recognition of less obvious, more *recherché* talent. In their search for fresh designs marketable as new and unique, developers are jump-starting careers, including those of women architects who often must try harder to establish credibility in a traditionally male-dominated field.

Several years ago Winka Dubbeldam, almost a secret of the academic and gallery worlds, completed a glassy, street-front condominium in Tribeca, with a facade deeply influenced by her experiments on the computer. One developer went to Los Angeles to find Neil Denari, long a paper architect without portfolio, to design a building that will cantilever in the airspace over the High Line, an elevated train bed which Diller Scofidio + Renfro, another avant-garde firm, is now renovating into New York's coolest park. Denari's thirteen-story structure of full-floor condominiums will be his first freestanding building.

The new condos have even invaded challenging neighborhoods. The financier who predicted the Swiss-ing of Manhattan might be amused to know that even the Bowery, long a fortress of urban dereliction, is hosting two boutique projects, one by Pritzker Prize laureates Herzog & de Meuron, at 40 Bond Street, and another down the block even nearer the Bowery, by Annabelle Selldorf, on a site that two decades ago hosted a crack supermarket. The German-born Selldorf also worked on the Urban Glass House, Philip Johnson's last building, on Spring Street, near the Hudson (a project more successful as a development than as an architectural statement). Near the Bowery, on Lafayette Street, on the outer fringe of Soho, gallery and museum designer Richard Gluckman and his partner David Mayner recently finished another street-front condominium with an undulating facade.

The list continues, a who's who of the next generation. The principals of Studio Asymptote, Hani Rashid and Lise Anne Couture, denizens of the academic world and

pioneers of computer design, were hired by Richard Meier's developer to build a twenty-four-unit condominium near Meier's. André Balazs, opening up new residential territory, has tapped Manhattan architects Calvin Tsao and Zack McKown to adapt a forty-story tower into the William Beaver, at the intersection of William and Beaver Streets in Wall Street—conceived as a self-contained, amenity-rich club.

Even Gramercy Park, that epicenter of Old Guard conservatism in New York, has a fresh new face, designed by London minimalist John Pawson. Not far away, on Park Avenue South, French Pritzker laureate Christian de Portzamparc has designed a crystalline structure. William Pedersen of New York's Kohn Pedersen Fox convinced preservationists to approve the shimmering glass ribbons of his new condominium on Greenwich Avenue and West 13th Street in the West Village.

These buildings, designed by the field's best and brightest and sporting *de facto* pedigree, are being marketed as art: The unusual requires unusual selling techniques. Publicists are applying the same sort of sales campaigns long used for luxury goods. Brochures are thick, sophisticated, visually poetic, and launches are glittering, celebrity-studded affairs.

If these buildings thrive at a nexus between art and commerce, they are also good urban news—gifts to the street and to the neighborhoods. New Yorkers are normally a very resistant lot, but the surprise of these projects is that they are not exploitative intrusions feasting off established neighborhoods but buildings that, like a tide, are lifting all boats in their environs. Some designs are better than others, but, in general, they are handsome, visually dynamic and thoughtful buildings that stand out without screeching: Their design DNA is subtle rather than flamboyant. They bring fresh energy. They do not try to blend in like the pastiche postmodernist disappearing acts of the previous generation.

Using fine materials at the service of challenging concepts, they represent the best architectural intentions of the moment, snapshots of current architectural thought. At last, New Yorkers have a new and growing community of buildings they can show off when friends come to town asking to see the new, the good and the beautiful. We no longer have to pay for a ticket to visit a museum show to see what might be. Utopia has hit the street. BG