



15 Central Park West by architect Robert AM Stern is the highest priced apartment building in the history of New York. Illustration by dbox, a branding & creative agency

Real Estate

LIVING IT UP

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MICHAEL GROSS, AUTHOR

BY FREDDIE CAMPION

—As the old saying goes, “All’s fair in love, war and New York city real estate”, and no one knows this better than author Michael Gross. A life-long Manhattanite himself, the former New York Times columnist has spent the last few decades chronicling New York’s high-end housing market – from the golden age of the Manhattan apartment building in the 1920s, to the current era of architecturally daring high-rises, occupied by Hollywood A-listers and tech billionaires. Not least in 740 Park, his book about the co-op at 740 Park Avenue – the childhood home of Jackie Kennedy Onassis one of the city’s most exclusive addresses – which, at its core, is a definitive history of the changing face of luxury in New York, or, as Gross explains to Freddie Campion, “the inevitable things that happen when money, power and ego combine”.

Freddie Campion: What is it you’re working on at the moment?

Michael Gross: My next book, which is about the apartment building at 15 Central Park West. 740 Park was about the good old days and this is about a brand new building and a brand new group of people between 2007 and the present.

Freddie: The financial crisis must come into play then?

Michael: It’s about the kind of people that didn’t feel the financial crisis, if you can believe it.

Freddie: What is it about 15 Central Park West that peaked your interest?

Michael: It’s the first New York building built to the standards of 740 Park Avenue, and for the same kind of people. Also, when I wrote the 740 Park, Steve Schwarzman’s giant 34-room apartment had just lost the title of the most expensive individual residence in New York to the penthouse at 15 Central Park West, so it’s an interesting continuation in that way.

Freddie: You talk about the golden era of the New York apartment building being between 1919 and 1931, why did it end so abruptly?

Michael: A lot of the great buildings were going up as the great depression hit, so the financial realities are what stopped it. Then war stopped it; and then there was a period of very high taxation when fortunes like those of the 1920s just didn’t exist any more.

Freddie: What changed to bring them back?

Michael: In the 1980s there was this great burst of moneymaking again. I pin the start of it to 1969, when Saul Steinberg made his run on Chemical Bank. He then bought what would become the Schwarzman apartment for \$225,000. Which was \$25,000 less than it had cost in 1929, when it was new. It’s astonishing, but it shows you what had happened to those buildings. Then in the 1990s the kinds of people with more money than God began to rescue them from white elephant status and made them desirable again. That’s what set the stage for developers like Donald Trump to build true luxury buildings. At the beginning of the 21st century when Time Warner got built, you had buildings setting records once again, and you saw the price of apartment per square foot literally go from \$1,000 to \$10,000.

Freddie: When you think of the 1920s you think of the old upstairs-downstairs trope, is that still the same today?

Michael: Yes, but I’d say I’m more interested in the sociology of the residents than I am in the sociology of the gears that make the machine run. A friend of mine said to me once that there are writers who are fascinated by the victims, and there are people who are fascinated by the perpetrators. Clearly I’m someone who is more interested in the perps.

Freddie: So you’re more interested in how these big names interact with each other?

Michael: One of the fascinating things about New York apartment buildings is that they are hives, to an extent, and there are king and queen bees in those hives. And there are the relative worker bees in those hives, and they’re not necessarily the doormen or the elevator people. Even at 740 Park, where everyone was rich, there were clear divisions between the showy people who had the front apartments on Park Avenue and used the Park Avenue entrance, and the more restrained people who had the slightly smaller apartments and used the far more discreet 71 East 71st Street entrance. These are inevitable things that happen when money, power and ego combine.

Freddie: Have these buildings always been impossible to get into?

Michael: The fact is, even though some co-ops were conceived as clubs for like-minded people, they’re really not clubs.

Actually these buildings are built in such a way that generally no more than two apartments on a floor share an elevator, so you rarely see your neighbours. And if you’re powerful enough, the elevator operator knows to not stop if someone else hits the elevator button. Years ago, when Greta Garbo died, I wrote an article for *New York Magazine*, and one of the great scenes was the fact she lived in the same building as one of her great romantic rivals – a fashion designer named Valentina. Obviously when Garbo was in the elevator it was not allowed to stop for Valentina and when Valentina was in the elevator it did not stop for Garbo. It goes to show you that the rich are very different in many ways, but they are also the same.

Freddie: What’s the biggest difference between one of these buildings and just a normal New York co-op?

Michael: The difference is, for the kinds of people I’m writing about at least, the last thing they’re interested in is drama. The kinds of disputes they get into go like this: “Motherfucker, your terrace sprung a leak and ruined my walls. Either you fix it the way I want or I’ll sue your ass. And I’m not going to pay any attention to it because I have a team of lawyers on \$1,800 an hour who do those things for me.” I don’t think that they’re interested in having a chat downstairs in the gym about whether Mrs Murphy at apartment 3A is entertaining too many gentlemen callers. Their lives are busy enough.

Freddie: Is Manhattan a place where one building can change all the other buildings around it?

Michael: At the moment the Hearst Tower is one of the great fabulous buildings of New York, but even ten years after it was built the centre of gravity hasn’t shifted to 56th Street and 8th Avenue. Maybe that’s more to do with the fact that glossy magazine people used to command far more attention in the popular imagination 10 to 15 years ago. Back then Anna Wintour used to be Mark Zuckerberg, whereas now Mark Zuckerberg is Mark Zuckerberg.

Freddie: In New York now, what is the prevailing profession in these luxury buildings? Is there a dot com building and a media mogul building, for instance?

Michael: No, I don’t think that’s the case any more. I think you can talk about

neighbourhoods. Entertainment people have centred on Tribeca for a long time, for instance, because it was where you could get a big apartment without the approval of a board and still have privacy. You can tell how much things have changed by the fact that a townhouse on Washington Place where I lived for 17 years just came on the market for \$28 million and change – a staggering figure. In the 17 years that I lived on that street suddenly it became a street that was full of movie stars. When we put our apartment on the market in 2002, the kinds of people passed through were people like Michelle Williams and Philip Seymour Hoffman. It was a very different group than when my wife and I bought it.

Freddie: You usually think of the luxury New York apartment as an Uptown phenomenon, are they Downtown now too?

Michael: Oh, sure. Prior to 15 Central Park West the locus of attention was along the West Side Highway when Richard Meier began putting up his series of glass buildings in what had formerly been basically a neighbourhood full of leather bars and empty warehouses. At that moment, when Calvin Klein was buying into those buildings, those were the white-hot thing. Now you never even hear about Calvin Klein anymore. The question then becomes, what is permanent?

Freddie: Is there anything architecturally that draws you to the buildings you write about?

Michael: Part of the reason why I’m so enamoured with 15 Central Park West is that it’s about being new but also being part of the continuum, as opposed to being new for the sake of being new. For the last 10-20 years the culture of New York has been about being young and new for the sake of being new, and everything old is boring so forget about it. In fact, that ignored where the power really resides in the city. The truth is the hybrid, that’s represented by 15 Central Park West, not the old stick-in-the-muds on Park Avenue, or whoever lives in the latest condo on Rivington Street. What’s abundantly clear is that this is the new locus of wealth and power, and yet it is not just new. And it’s not just old. It’s a fascinating combination of the two, which, for me, is the best of what New York should be.