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Bygone Romance Makes A Return

With so many glass towers vying for attention in New York City, some developers are looking to the past for inspiration.

NOE & ASSOCIATES WITH THE BOUNDARY

By TIM McKEOUGH

Once the scaffolding comes down and construction crews move on, the new Beckford House and Tower condominium buildings now taking shape on the Upper East Side of Manhattan could easily be mistaken for structures built nearly a century ago.

On the outside, the two buildings, which have already topped out: at 301 East 80th Street and 301 East 81st Street, have handsome facades of hand-laid brick, textured limestone and ornate metalwork, including medallions depicting the sun and moon.



BRYAN STUDIOS

Inside, many of the 104 units, ranging from \$2.3 million to over \$20 million, have traditional layouts recalling the work of Rosario Candela — the architect known for the sumptuous design of buildings like 740 Park Avenue and 960 Fifth Avenue. There are formal dining rooms, separate kitchens featuring hand-painted cabinet doors, living rooms with thick crown molding, and master bathrooms awash in white statuary marble and fluted glass.

For Terrence Lowenberg and Todd Cohen, the principals of Icon Realty Management, which is developing the buildings

Above, one of the Beckford House and Tower buildings, which have facades of hand-laid brick, textured limestone and ornate metalwork. Left, the lobby of the Vandewater, where designers aimed for a “kind of old-world materiality.”

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Top from left, 25 Park Row in the financial district and that building's penthouse. Above from left, the exterior of the Vandewater in Morningside Heights and a dining room in the tower. Moving down from right: the facade of the Centrale in Midtown, an apartment in the Centrale, and the Beckford Tower lobby.

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based on designs by Studio Sofield, it's all part of a passion project that they hope will get noticed in a marketplace now crowded with modern-looking towers.

"We both grew up on the Upper East Side, in postwar buildings," Mr. Lowenberg said. "But we were always drawn to the prewar aesthetic and wanted to create something prewarlike but with modern amenities."

Mr. Cohen added: "It's much warmer than the glass boxes. We wanted to deliver a more traditional layout, and we did think that would help us stand out."

After watching cutting-edge contemporary residential buildings by architects like Zaha Hadid, Jean Nouvel and Frank Gehry sprout across the city for years, many developers and designers are now looking in the rearview mirror for inspiration. Rather than trying to develop buildings with contorted forms or monastic minimalism, they are aiming to evoke the romantic glow of New York's past with new buildings that recall Art Deco, neo-Georgian and neo-Gothic style.

THE ACTIVITY ISN'T LIMITED to the Upper East and Upper West Sides, which have long been bastions of prewar style. New residential towers that riff on the grandeur of the city's storied past — but include all the conveniences and amenities that 21st-century buyers of new developments expect — are now rising everywhere from Morningside Heights to the financial district.

William Sofield, the founder of Studio Sofield, sees the activity as part of a broader trend that is bringing renewed interest to artisanal, handcrafted goods of all sorts, from hand-stitched leather handbags to custom workshop-made lighting and furniture.

"It became this huge obsession, across the board, of things having quality, and things being handmade," he said. "All of a sudden, glass towers felt cold, icy, alien. People went back to these things that had material quality to them."

Mr. Sofield, who has designed fashion boutiques for brands including Tom Ford, Derek Lam and Coach, along with a wide variety of private homes, is also at work on the interiors of another Manhattan condo that plays off New York's storybook past: 111 West 57th Street.

That 1,428-foot-tall project, which was designed by SHoP Architects with a breathtakingly slender form that could only be realized with contemporary engineering, nevertheless nods to Art Deco with a stepped profile and facade of undulating terra cotta and sinuous bronze metalwork — details that are partly in response to the landmark 1920s Steinway & Sons building at the tower's base. Inside, the building offers sumptuous interiors featuring dark-hued woods, onyx and custom bronze hardware.

In Hudson Square, the Greenwich West condominium at 110 Charlton Street also aims to reflect "New York's golden age of design," according to the project's website, with an exterior of embossed and pewter-glazed brick, and curved corners inspired by Art Deco.

Designed by the Paris-based architecture firm Loci Anima, with interiors by Sébastien Segers, the project is something of a throwback compared with neighbors like the Urban Glass House by Philip Johnson, the snaking 160 Leroy by Herzog & de Meuron, and the ethereal glass volumes of 565 Broome Street by Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

"Our sense was that what people really appreciate in SoHo, TriBeCa and the West Village is the historic character," said Phillip Gesue, the chief development officer at Strategic Capital, which is collaborating on the project with Cape Advisors and Forum Absolute Capital Partners.

"There are exceptions to the rule that have been very popular, like the Richard Meier buildings," on Perry and Charles Streets, he said. "But I think those exceptions are sort of like eating anchovies — it's wonderful when you do it, but it's not something you want to do every night."

GIVEN TODAY'S UNPREDICTABLE political climate and erratic world leaders, Mr. Gesue is betting that buyers will seek out homes that feel familiar and comforting, such as the 170 units at Greenwich West, priced from about \$1.1 million to \$8 million.

"We thought this romantic notion might be something that people would clamor toward in these uncertain times," he said.

According to Colin Ellard, a cognitive neuroscientist focused on the intersection of psychology and design at the University of Waterloo in Canada, Mr. Gesue may be on to something.

Dr. Ellard pointed to the concept of mortality salience. "When people are made aware of their own mortality, their tastes, preferences and attitudes change," he said. "They are pulled toward more conservative values."

But buildings made of brick and stone have other, enduring appeals, too. "Traditional designs tend to be a lot more biomimetic — they tend to be more similar to the features of natural environments," Dr. Ellard said. "They resonate with these ancient circuits we have that lead us to prefer things that are natural."

Or course, a hint of New York's bygone glamour doesn't hurt either.

"Who of us has not dreamed of living in the San Remo, the Century or those great, classic, Upper West Side residential buildings?" said Adam Rolston, a partner at Incorporated Architecture and Design. "It's just part of being a New Yorker."

Hoping to design something that will become similarly iconic at the Vandewater, a

condo at 543 West 122nd Street in Morning-side Heights with the developer Savanna, Mr. Rolston said his firm took its cues from nearby landmarks to give the structure an immediate sense of history.

"We thought of it as a Venn diagram combining the neo-Gothic architecture of Riverside Church and the neo-Classical architectures of Columbia, both of which are predominantly rendered in limestone," he said. "It's a deep contextual play."

The Vandewater has a concrete-and-glass exterior, but the coloration and stepped details of the concrete are meant to evoke limestone, while piers become gradually skinnier as the building rises to give the 33-story, 183-unit structure an added sense of verticality.

Inside the units themselves, which range in price from \$920,000 to \$6 million, "it needed to feel more like your favorite corner of the Avery Library than some master-of-the-universe penthouse," Mr. Rolston said. "There are rich browns and pewter hardware that evoke this kind of Old World materiality."

TO BE CLEAR, none of these new towers are copies of buildings from the past. They generally include the big kitchens, expansive bathrooms, high-end finishes, soaring ceilings, large windows, up-to-date building systems and acres of amenities that are now de rigueur, while largely eliminating relics of the past, like tiny maids' rooms for live-in help. And, from the street, some of them still look shiny and new, even as they nod to the past.

Such is the case at the Centrale at 138 East 50th Street, designed by Pelli Clark Pelli Architects, with interiors by Champalimaud Design. The narrow 71-story tower is mostly glass but is populated with numerous Art Deco flourishes, including vertical ribbons of chevron-patterned terra cotta, a lobby of overlapping cove lights recalling Radio City Music Hall and signage completed in an elongated typeface. The project's website even quotes F. Scott Fitzgerald.

"Obviously, it's not an Art Deco building in the sense that the Chrysler Building is, but it's these little touches that make the building interesting," said Art Hooper, the president of Ceruzzi Properties, who credited the company's founder, Louis Ceruzzi Jr., with setting the design direction before his death in 2017.

"He would never build just a plain glass cube," Mr. Hooper said. "He wanted to dress it up."



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The Centrale's Art Deco flair makes sense, said Bertrand Buchin, an agent with Douglas Elliman, which is handling sales of the 124 units, priced from about \$1.7 million to over \$10 million, because the tower has immediate views of the Chrysler Building to the south, and the General Electric Building to the north.

"First, people have to like the apartment, the amenities, the views, the location and everything else," Mr. Buchin said. But the hints of Art Deco, he added, are "the icing on the cake."

In NoMad, the Rockefeller Group, of Rockefeller Center fame, is playing up its Jazz Age chops at Rose Hill, a condo designed by CetraRuddy at 30 East 29th Street with 123 units priced from about \$1.2 million to \$12 million.

The exterior there will feature vertical bands of bronze-colored metal with a chevron pattern and a dramatically up-lit crown. Inside, apartments will be completed with materials meant to project warmth and texture, including rusticated wood floors and master bathrooms with

dark marble floors, walnut-and-bronze vanities and aged brass fittings. The marketing materials, meanwhile, include a typeface that resembles neon lettering, a video with a brassy jazz tune and drawings that recall Work Projects Administration posters from the 1930s.

John Cetra, a founding principal of CetraRuddy, said his firm arrived at the building's design after mulling over a key question: "How does it relate to this city called Gotham, which has a very clear style, a sort of grittiness and an attitude?"

The answer the architects came up with has appealed to buyers like Akash Gupta, who is in contract to buy a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment at Rose Hill after looking at numerous developments in the neighborhood.

"There was a lot of supply in the area," said Mr. Gupta, 47, who works in finance. But when he saw the Rose Hill sales gallery, "It was an easy decision," he said. "It was a great building that jumped out as something differentiated. It felt special, like it was not just another building. Everything else was regular glass and steel."

According to Beth Fisher, a senior managing director at Corcoran Sunshine Marketing Group, Mr. Gupta is far from alone in his opinions.

"There has been a backlash against all-glass towers, particularly in neighborhoods or areas that are really seeking to have a highly residential character," Ms. Fisher said. "And I think, fundamentally, people seek a sense of solidity for tumultuous times."

She pointed to 25 Park Row in the financial district, where her firm is handling

Towers that look like homes, not glass office buildings.

sales, as an example. "We've just been on the market since January and are nearly 40 percent sold," she said. "Certainly, some of the most successful buildings in New York right now are iterative of prewar design."

That project, a 50-story, 110-unit building designed by CookFox Architects, is being billed as a contemporary interpretation of an Art Deco skyscraper, with available units ranging from about \$1.7 million to \$25 million for the top duplex penthouse.

"We went for the timeless, understated elegance building," said David Dishy, a partner at L+M Development Partners, which is building the project with the J&R Music family. Not, he noted, "a peacock."

IT'S AN APPROACH to designing new residential towers that the architect Robert A. M. Stern, New York's perennial hitmaker of buildings that exude traditional style, understands well.

Over the years, Mr. Stern has designed a string of stately Manhattan condos that set sales records, including 15 Central Park West and 220 Central Park South (whose penthouse became the most expensive home in the country when it sold for \$238 million this past January).

Compared with glass skyscrapers, Mr. Stern mused that his masonry buildings appealed to buyers because they look decidedly different from office towers and are eminently livable.

"You have walls between the windows so that in your apartment you can hang a picture," he said. "Or, should you be one of those ancient people who still has books, you can have a bookcase."

Now that glass curtain walls and unconventional forms are almost expected in new construction, Mr. Stern suggested that buildings rooted in tradition were the ones breaking from the crowd.

"We are the radical architects," he said. "We are the architects who draw by hand as we design buildings, who look to the past for formal inspiration and who use wonderful materials, wherever possible, like limestone or brick."