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Condo Cool

Starchitect Branding and the Cost of “Effortless Living”

OR

Another Episode in the Continuing Quest for Social Status through Design

by **Sondra Fein**

A recent issue of *W* magazine features Zaha Hadid’s latest handbag design for Louis Vuitton. The architect, one-upping the fashion world, has transformed to three dimensions the famous Vuitton trademark monogram, extruding the monogram from the bag’s surface in a characteristically fluid gesture that announces to the fashion world — and those who covet the objects and imagery that constitute its products — that architecture is the hippest and smartest form of fashion, its products the ultimate status symbols. Tiffany’s isn’t too far behind, for their latest artist-in-residence is none other than Frank Gehry, offering his own formalist-chic *objets*, draped across the sinuous necklines and torsos of the women modeling the necklaces, rings, and jewelry he designed. And *Vogue* magazine hasn’t skipped a beat: SANAA architect Kazuo Sejima is featured in a recent spread on her buildings for Dior and Prada. Are these cultural statements that architecture has gone mainstream? No, it’s just the opposite: Here is potent evidence that architects and the star power of a starchitect brand is eliding with and supporting the exclusivity of the highest-end fashion.

“Starchitects” and their work are brandable, and their brand is marketable to global buyers of high-end luxury goods. These go beyond the objects of fashion and retail, of course, to the other great object that causes unprecedented lifestyle lust and envy: real estate, and especially the luxury condo.

The luxury condo boom is, these days, nowhere more omnipresent than in Manhattan, with, according to one real estate agent, 13,000 new units on the market in December 2006. With this many units still saleable, developers have looked beyond intense marketing — these days, nearly all luxury condominiums in Manhattan boast a long list of amenities and hotel-like services for residents — to starchitect branding. Beginning with Richard Meier’s trend-setting 1999 luxury housing towers at Perry Street, the last several years have seen luxury condo projects associated with such boldface names as Herzog & de Meuron, Jean Nouvel, Santiago Calatrava, Bernard Tschumi, Enrique Norten, Frank Gehry, Philip Johnson, Charles Gwathmey, Norman Foster, Richard Rogers, Michael Graves, Richard Gluckman, Christ-

On Culture

ian de Portzamparc, Philippe Starck, Robert Stern, John Pawson, Arquitectonica, Neil Denari, Winka Dubbledam, SHoP, and SOM.¹ (Not to be outdone, the fashion world itself contributes to the designer-branded apartment genre, with new luxury housing developments touting residential interiors designed by Giorgio Armani, Peter Som, and Jade Jagger.)

Most of the starchitect-branded developments — excluding Robert Stern's new Central Park West limestone rendition of a classic prewar apartment tower and Graves's colorful limestone-and-brick *Impala* and *425 Fifth Avenue* — feature floor-to-ceiling windows and fully glazed exterior walls, minimalist interior design, high ceilings, and top-of-the-line interior finishes and appliances. Some also present visitors with minimalist-chic reception lobbies replete with art and carefully applied touches of high-concept landscaping. All will set buyers back an extra 30 to 50% per square foot. Recent statistics in the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* reveal that, for the luxury housing market in New York, starchitect-branded apartments average \$2,500 to \$3,000 per square foot; other luxury buildings in New York average \$1,610 per square foot.²

This housing is far beyond the reach of most prospective buyers. If the Frank Sciame-backed Calatrava project *Eighty South Street* is built, owning one of the architect's twelve boxes in the sky will set you back \$29 million. While the Calatrava project tops the list for starchitect condo prices, most average \$1.5 million for a one-bedroom unit.³ Of two available three-bedroom units in Nouvel's *40 Mercer Street*, the less expensive is priced at \$5.2 million.⁴ These apartments are not just well-designed places to live; they are collectible objects for consumption by the wealthiest of New Yorkers and in many cases for growing numbers of ultra-wealthy global nomads snatching up these and other high-end properties around the world. One fifth of the apartments at Nouvel's *40 Mercer* and Meier's *165 Charles Street* have been sold to foreign owners, and a recently published statistic is that 32% of all newly built New York condos are purchased as investments or second homes.⁵

To lure prospective buyers into owner-

ship of one of the myriad condominiums available to them, marketing teams have set up elaborate sales centers replete with full-scale mockups of the dwelling units, videos meant to educate the laity about the significance of the starchitect whose brand they are about to support, and freebies contributing to the cult of personality surrounding the marketing of these luxury commodities. Marketing teams comprised of model look-alikes dressed in chic attire tour visitors around their potential purchases while handing out things like tote bags emblazoned with images of the architect's face. These goodie bags often contain hard-bound portfolios of the designer's previous projects, carefully folded copies of presentation-size drawings of each unit type, and select caches of articles about the respective starchitects to further illuminate the masses. Some marketers even go so far as to bring prospective clients out on yachts to better see a project from a waterside vantage. These starchitect-branded condos exude more than good design; they become signifiers of an entire lifestyle.⁶ So what are these luxury consumers buying into, and what are they getting for their money?

Expansive city views through floor-to-ceiling glazed walls are *de rigueur*. In fact, most of these new projects could be understood as meditations on the curtain wall, an architectural idiom once reserved for corporate office towers or glass houses in the woods. Philip Johnson's office's ongoing high-end condominium project on Spring Street is called the *Urban Glass House*. According to the architect and representatives at the Sunshine Group — the marketing team behind this building as well as Meier's *165 Charles Street* and *173–176 Perry Street*, Nouvel's *40 Mercer*, Pawson's *50 Gramercy Park North*, Herzog & de Meuron's *40 Bond Street*, *Downtown by Philippe Stark*, and SOM's *101 Warren Street* and *1 Central Park*⁷ — Johnson's *Urban Glass House* is a conceptual extension of his house in New Canaan, updated to respond to and to reflect the “21st-century city.”

Despite its “glass house” name, the building could more accurately be called a “shade house,” since it has a sophisticated sun-shading system set to respond to varied

lighting conditions and privacy requirements. Meier's elegant new *165 Charles Street* includes a computer-controlled, layered shading system that the developer spent over \$2.5 million to install.⁸ At *40 Bond Street*, large glass panes are supported by mullions encased in bottleneck-green glass shells, a reinterpretation of the ornament on the cast-iron frame of the original building that the project retrofits. Interestingly, the sun-dappled interior renderings of the residences featured on the marketing website ever so subtly show large curtains bordering each of the oversized floor-to-ceiling windows.

Nouvel's *40 Mercer*, a twelve-story complex grid of grey-tinted triple-glazing with electric blue and red-tinged horizontal glass insets, is a highly refined play of contextual floor-to-floor scaling, color, and shade, plus voyeuristic potential for those who live behind these selectively transparent walls. Here, the walls not only move — on the lower floors, the seven-by-twelve-foot glass panels slide out and down the curtain wall just enough to create safety railings for residents, and on the upper floors huge glass panels slide along horizontal tracks to create openings as wide as twenty feet. According to the website for the soon-to-be completed project, “Windows [will be] provided with recessed shades to provide uniformity of appearance from the street,” and “blackout shades [are to be] provided for all bedrooms.”⁹

Such shading is necessary to ensure that residents have a modicum of privacy, for the residential floors of the building are treated no differently from their double-height retail sisters on the ground level: Floor-to-ceiling glass walls put residents on display, creating something like a storefront for living, a stage for the residential dramas of the rich. (One could even argue that the architecture itself, pushed out to the operable skin, participates in shaping the residential events constantly in flux and on view.) Such displays are lost at the highest floors, where the voyeuristic pleasures of living against glass walls provide all of the benefits and few of the drawbacks, but for those who live on the first few floors, living in an urban glass house precludes enjoying a morning cup of coffee

while standing by the window in your underwear.

My visit to Meier's 173 – 176 Perry Street revealed just how exposing and unforgiving these glazed facades can be. While highly refined, with elegant shadow boxes and a dynamic play of solid and void between glass and thick whitened concrete floor plates, the Perry Street complex, in its aesthetic purity, suffers when the dwellings are actually occupied. One apartment, with its huge curtains left half open, revealed a mess of the spoils of interior refurbishment and not-so-chic furniture pushed out to the building's transparent skin. It was as if someone had left his laundry out to dry. Meier has, however, attempted to prevent buyers of condos in his Charles Street complex from being messy: There, buyers are treated to Meier-designed interior finishes and can purchase "total design" services for interior furnishings to match the aesthetic spirit of the exterior.¹⁰

These interiors, on view through the huge glass walls, require a hyper slickness devoid of any domestic clutter to match the minimalist chic of the exteriors. Such a minimalist aesthetic might best be described as ascetic, a word appropriate to the monastic, the poor, and adherents of early Modernist models of machine-like living.¹¹ Yet *this* asceticism is minimal in material but maximal in the resources it gobbles to create and maintain this model of urban hipness. New minimalism — with its finely detailed, overtly refined, and yet empty spaces — as applied to residential inhabitation, requires that the least possible activity actually takes place within its bounds.¹² Life must be pared down to the (highest end) essentials to maintain its spotless chic, its sober lightness. Thus, while most of these luxury buildings advertise endless lists of hotel services to augment the value gained at such high price tags, its users — and architects themselves — may not realize how necessary these services are to live stylishly within these spaces. An array of amenities — from concierges and in-house dining to twenty-four-hour child and pet care (to keep the messy creatures out of sight) to on-site fitness trainers, driving ranges, lap pools, wine cellars, movie theaters, stylists, personal chefs, and, of course maid and maintenance services —

become a necessary extension of the activities and spaces of aestheticized living. (For the amazingly extensive list of services, see my endnotes.)

Richard Meier thoughtfully includes wall-long closets, so residents can hide their stuff in a mask of whitewashed poché, and he tucks large storage spaces for each apartment discreetly below grade, so that they can keep the bulk of their clutter out of his sparkling white-and-frosted-glass interiors.¹³ Like the servants' quarters lurking at the base of Le Corbusier's *Villa Savoye*, the amenities offered to the property residents become essential for the maintenance of an ascetic-chic lifestyle, spatialized in the sense that they contribute to how the dwellings look and function. The "effortless living" that nightclub owner turned hotelier turned real estate developer Ian Schrager promises with his list of amenities included with ownership in his projects with Herzog & de Meuron at Bond Street and John Pawson at Gramercy Park is a result of more than luxuries — these amenities are necessities for maintenance of the image, both literal and metaphorical, that these properties embody.¹⁴

One wonders, with this proliferation of Modernist-minimalist residential properties and the growing spate of shelter magazines promoting similar styles of living as well as a mass audience for now household-name architects,¹⁵ is Modernism just a new sign of hipness for the ultra rich and those that aspire to join the circle of real estate fashionistas? By branding minimalist-chic living in properties priced far beyond the reach of average homebuyers, are architect designers collaborating in the creation of a culture of good taste inseparable from social exclusion?

In 1919, Georg Simmel observed that fashion is, for the middle classes, tied inextricably to a need for belonging and is, for the upper classes, deeply fixed to a desire for distinction.¹⁶ Perhaps it is the exclusivity of maintaining truly minimalist conditions in one's dwelling and the exclusivity that ownership of such rarities as these properties brings that secures the rich in the realm of distinction so desired by all hoarders of cultural capital. The painful question is: Are these social constructs in

any way compatible with Modern architecture's essentially utopian foundations, and are these starchitects — at least those truly capable of imagining new modes of living for all classes — creating and contributing to a lifestyle that they themselves admire?

All questions of taste, social status, and cultural capital aside, one also wonders which of these current luxury dwelling projects attempts to rethink the ways we, or at least the super-rich among us, live? Has anything really changed about the way architecture shapes the way New Yorkers live since the advent of loft living in the early 1980s? Do any of the current projects reimagine the role of the individual within the collective that housing cries out to address? Are any of these starchitects and developers — aside from MVRDV's proposal for Rockrose Development Corporation to place elevated gardens and affordable housing above a FedEx warehouse on the far West Side — doing anything to address Manhattan's continuing need for mixed-income and affordable housing?¹⁷ Save for shared private landscapes, shared loggias, and building amenities, the real attempts at innovation in these recent condo projects are more tectonic and architectural than social.

Charles Gwathmey imagines that residential walls can sway and undulate: His highly-reflective, if urbanistically confrontational curtain wall at 1 Astor Place presses in and out against an otherwise fairly rectilinear, unsurprising layout of living spaces. (Rectilinear spaces cater to both efficiency and familiarity in housing but offer few surprises at the hand of even the most daring designer.)

Richard Gluckman also works with undulating glazing at his 1 Kenmare Square project, reusing and shifting formwork floor-by-floor to create a curving, rippling effect along the Lafayette Street facade that shapes living spaces on that side of his interiors. While offering a sculptural face to the city, Gluckman's design works with repetition of components — brick, glazing, and structure — to create what seems a highly customized effect. (Like Gwathmey's, the bulk of Gluckman's interior living spaces are white, rectilinear boxes, reflected along the simple, flat, punctured

masonry facade at the back of the building.)

Winka Dubbledam's free-plan lofts at 497 *Greenwich Street* push against a shifting, folding curtain wall that creates habitable terraces between two layers of glass and that folds outward at street level to create an awning and entrance to lobby and gallery spaces beneath the residences.

Enrique Norten, unafraid of non-rectilinear living spaces, achieves more varied dwelling units in his design for 1 *York* in Tribeca than those seen in most other projects, projects that do little more than press all of the architecture to the skin and rely on views outward to remedy the smallness of the dwelling spaces.

Herzog & de Meuron's carefully designed project at 40 *Bond* embeds a row of townhouses with private rear gardens within the overall massing of the apartment block above, creating a structure conducive to multiple modes of inhabitation. In addition to providing a mixing of townhouse and apartment living, the architects have also begun to address the growing desire for flexibility in living spaces: Taking the free plan one step further, Herzog & de Meuron allow the walls between the bedroom and living room to slide and move, so that residents can alter and distort even their own perceptions of privacy.

SOM's 101 *Warren Street* follows a similar mixing of living models to that at 40 *Bond*, interspersing lofts with "sky homes," "rooftop homes," penthouses, townhouses, and sky-high loggias in a large, multistory dwelling.

Jean Nouvel's innovations extend beyond the ingenuity of his sliding curtain walls and his selective use of color and translucency to creative programming. The residential complex not only includes a block-through park and adjacent multi-story "garden lounge" of landscaped roof terraces, it also offers private "pool residences" for those lucky enough to afford a Nouvel-designed glass box and a starchitect-designed private pool-in-the-sky.

In a daring albeit exorbitantly expensive move, Calatrava imagines that townhouses don't have to touch the ground at all, for each box in his cantilevering sculpture at South Street is a self-contained

townhouse hovering over the New York seaport.

All of these amenities and architectural moves are exciting and interesting, but will any, like couture designers' ready-to-wear collections and "bridge lines," trickle down to (more) affordable condo design?

Superficial details and appearances are already being copied by the more generic developer-driven projects vying for a piece of the New York real estate market: Toll Brothers, the housing development company best known for the homogenizing McMansions it proliferates across American suburbs, has caught on to the urban glass-house phenomena. The company's first condominium endeavor in Manhattan exudes, according to their website, "urban glamour" with views toward the "lightshow" of Manhattan, through — you guessed it — floor-to-ceiling windows. Here, rather than a multiplicity of rooms, Toll Brothers is contributing to the minimalist chic epidemic spreading across Manhattan, multiplying the need for things to happen outside the residence to make living possible. □

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NOTES

1. The list of starchitect projects going up in Manhattan reads like the Who's Who of Harry Coco Brown's *Houses at Sagaponac*, where thirty-four architects led by master planner Richard Meier — including Rogers, Johnson, Eric Owen Moss, Stan Alan, Samuel Mockbee, Harry Cobb, Reiser + Uemoto, Richard Gluckman, MVRDV, Steven Holl, Zaha Hadid, Michael Graves, and others — were commissioned to create homes meant to counter the oversized repetitious McMansion developments encroaching on local Hamptons property. See *American Dream: The Houses at Sagaponac: Modern Living in the Hamptons* (New York: Rizzoli, 2003).

2. Recent press on Robert Stern's 15 *Central Park West* notes that the penthouse in that condominium property recently sold for upwards of \$4,500 per square foot. See S. Johanna Robledo, "Buying, by the Numbers" *New York Magazine*, October 30, 2006. See also Julie V. Iovine, "Living at Cool, Not Just Visiting," *New York Times*, February 9, 2006, and Troy McMullen, "Condos With a Name: 'Available': The Architect May Be A-List, But the Location Often Isn't..."

Wall Street Journal, April 2, 2006.

3. The least expensive real-estate listings for the below projects featured on <www.corcoran.com> and <www.prudentialelliman.com>, accessed on January 4, 2006 include: *BLUE* (Bernard Tschumi), 766 sq. ft. 1BR 1BA \$835,000; 40 *Bond Street* (Herzog & de Meuron), 1269 sq. ft. 1BR 2BA \$3,425,000; 40 *Mercer* (Jean Nouvel), 2,206 sq. ft. 2BR 2.5 BA \$5,400,000; *Urban Glass House* (Philip Johnson), 1,489 sq. ft. 2 BR 2.5 BA \$1,900,000; 1 *Kenmare Square* (Richard Gluckman), 768 sq. ft. 1 BR 1 BA; \$1,299,000, 446 sq. ft. 0 BR (studio) 1 BA \$750,000; 101 *Warren* (SOM) sq. ft. 955 sq. ft. 1 BR 1.5 BA \$1,225,000.

4. Email exchange with 40 *Mercer* Residence Sales Manager, November 8, 2006.

5. With a weak dollar, real estate investments in the United States are relatively cheap for foreign buyers. Many of these investors are Russians, Koreans, and Saudis, who, in some cases, are buying entire buildings as investments. See S. Johanna Robledo.

6. According to Anna Moca Skillern of Omnicom Group, Inc., New York, a marketing company.

7. According to one real-estate insider, the Sunshine Group's services extend beyond marketing. Developers often pay the Sunshine Group to create the development pro-forma and even contribute to the design development of standard unit layouts.

8. December 27, 2006, conversation with Sunshine Group Senior Managing Director, James Lansill.

9. <www.40mercerso.com/>.

10. See Mark Wigley's excellent discussion "Whatever Happened to Total Design?" *Harvard Design Magazine*, Summer 1998, 18 – 25. Like Meier at 165 *Charles Street*, Calatrava, Gwathmey, Pawson, and Herzog & de Meuron offer interior design services to create seamless interior / exterior projects. Herzog & de Meuron's blurring of interior and exterior goes so far as to recreate the NYC graffiti pattern of the exterior fencing surrounding the property on the interior walls of the most intimate space, the bathroom and shower.

11. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu sheds light on the idea of aestheticized living: "The pure aesthetic is rooted in an ethic, or rather, an ethos of the elective distance from the necessities of the natural and social world, which may take the form of . . . an aestheticism which . . . takes the bourgeois denial of the social world to its limit. The detachment of the pure gaze cannot be dissociated from [a life of ease] that tends to induce an active distance from necessity." Bourdieu also discusses the exclusivity of a status-driven lifestyle outside more common, normative aesthetics: "The easiest, and so most frequent and most spectacular way to 'shock the bourgeois' by proving the extent of one's power to confer aesthetic status is . . . done by conferring aesthetic status on objects or ways of representing them that are excluded by the dominant aesthetic of the time." See Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Richard Nice, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 5, 46.

12. My recent visit to sales centers at the *Urban Glass House* and at 165 *Charles Street* revealed the need for daily maintenance to retain the pristine quality these sales mockups are meant to represent. With all of the life traipsing through these apartments, the sales center mockups reveal how quickly these apartments can begin to look shabby without constant maintenance.

13. At basement level, roughly one third of the build-

ing footprint is comprised of residents' storage. Each residence at 165 Charles Street comes with an individual basement storage unit ranging from 100 to 150 sq. ft.

14. Services for residents as described on the 40 Bond website, <www.40bond.com/services.html>:

AVAILABLE AT 40 BOND:

- 24 hours a day, 7 days a week complete residential apartment oversight, supervision, administration, management and care (Lifestyle Management)
- Valet parking, limousine service and car wash
- 24-hour doormen / concierge trained by Gramercy Park Hotel
- Complete housekeeping service
- Turn-down service
- Room service
- Bathroom amenity services
- Massage and spa services
- Catering services and event planning for private meetings, events or functions
- Supervised childcare and babysitting services
- Benefit of preferred "bulk rate" discount programs arranged with local vendors
- Personal shopping and delivery services, including groceries, cleaners, pharmacies, etc.
- Messenger services for local pick-ups and deliveries
- Newspaper delivery to door
- Pet walking and sitting services
- Pick-up and delivery services for laundry and dry cleaning
- Technical support services for computers, entertainment centers and telecommunication equipment
- Painting service
- Repair service
- Fresh flower service
- Take-out service

"All personnel at 40 Bond are trained and supervised by the Gramercy Park Hotel's five-star, world-class human resources department."

[Services and amenities for 40 Bond Residents]

AVAILABLE THROUGH GRAMERCY PARK HOTEL:

- 24 hours a day, 7 days a week full access to all Gramercy Park Hotel services, amenities and privileges
- Worldwide concierge service
- 24 hours a day, 7 days a week toll free service line for general support and assistance, and special internationally available concierge services
- 24-hour telephone switchboard system for screening calls, taking and delivering messages and wake-up calls
- 24-hour security surveillance
- Benefit of preferred "bulk rate" discounted monthly parking with local garage operators
- Priority status for Hotel room reservations and restaurants
- Room upgrades based upon availability
- Use of front and back private landscaped gardens
- Access to all David Barton Gyms
- Priority access to the penthouse suite and all other rentable public space for private functions
- Guaranteed entrance to all bars and events available to Hotel guests
- Access to all events and other amenities avail-

- able to Hotel guests
- Signing privileges and direct billing for all Hotel services
- Access to the fitness center and personal trainers
- Access to massage and spa services
- Access to meeting rooms and business center
- Rental of laptop computers, facsimile machines, mobile telephones, state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment and multi-lingual secretarial services
- Access to DVD library
- Local and international postage, shipping and packaging services
- Check cashing privileges, currency conversion and exchange services
- Travel agent services
- "Some services are at an additional charge."

15. See Tom Spector, "The Morals of Modernist Minimalism: A Provocation," *Harvard Design Magazine* 25, Fall 2006 / Winter 2007, 84 - 90.

16. See Georg Simmel, "Die Mode," in *Philosophische Kultur* (1911; repr. Berlin: Wagenbach, 1986), 41, 44; and Frederic J. Schwartz, "Style versus Fashion," in *The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture before the First World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 59. Schwartz highlights Bruno Raueker's argument that "the middle class . . . seeks to acquire the same home environment, the same decorative appointments as the highest social strata," which, in Schwartz's words, is a mimicking of consumption habits of the upwardly adjacent class. See Raueker, *Die wirtschaftlichen Grundlagen des modernen Kunstgewerbes in London* (Munich: M. Reiger, 1912), 9.

17. Still in planning, Enrique Norten's design for his *Gowanus Village* project in Park Slope, Brooklyn, developed by Leviev Boymelgreen, includes a large affordable-housing component within its more than 300 units of housing and mixed-use facilities at 420 Carroll Street. MVRDV and Rockrose Development's plans for affordable housing above a FedEx facility along 12th Avenue at 48th Street has been stalled by Department of City Planning zoning obstacles. See Jaffer Kolb's report in *The Architects Newspaper*, July 26, 2006.