

Stylistic Trends in Multifamily Housing

Being modern means

always having a choice.

IN MANHATTAN, the epitome of high-rise luxury living has long been the so-called prewar apartment building. These high-rises, located along Park Avenue and Central Park West and constructed prior to the Second World War, are characterized by stone and brick façades, classical or Art Deco detailing inside and out, and formal apartment plans with entrance foyers, separate living and dining rooms, enclosed kitchens, and staff rooms. Though many apartment buildings were built in the ensuing decades, none achieved an equal measure of social status.

MICHAEL YTTERBERG

Figure 1: 173 and 176 Perry Street, 165 Charles Street, New York City (Perry Street Development Corporation and Alexico Management; Richard Meier & Partners, architects).



Figure 2: 15 Central Park West, New York City (Zeckendorf Development; Robert A. M. Stern Architects).



That changed in 1999, when Richard Meier, a Pritzker Prize-winning architect, was commissioned to build two small glass, steel and concrete luxury apartment buildings on the west side of Greenwich Village facing the Hudson River (Figure 1). 173 and 176 Perry Street (the buildings were finished in 2002 and a third, 165 Charles Street, was completed in 2005) were hailed as leading examples of Modernist residential design and became an instant hit, attracting a celebrity clientele including Calvin Klein and Martha Stewart. Similar all-glass residential buildings followed, many designed by brand-name architects. Critics speculated

whether the heyday of the prewar apartment building was over, now that its traditional design had been challenged by the floor-to-ceiling walls of glass.

In the meantime, Robert A. M. Stern, another well-known New York architect, was designing a series of high-rise apartment buildings in the city, taking as his model precisely the prewar buildings. Stern, who is dean of the Yale School of Architecture, is practically alone among the architectural elite in his continued championing of traditional architectural styles. His latest apartment project is 15 Central Park West, which takes its place beside some of the most spectacular pre-

war residential buildings on the west side of Central Park (Figure 2). The building is totally clad in limestone, but in spite of having traditional masonry on the exterior, with windows instead of glass walls, the quality of light and views are uncompromised. Celebrities who have bought units here include Citigroup creator Sandy Weill and rock star Sting. 15 Central Park West, which began to be occupied in late 2007, has turned out to be one of the most successful residential projects in Manhattan's history; all the units were reportedly sold prior to completion of construction for a total value of approximately two billion dollars. Buying in 15 Central Park West is proving to be a sound investment, with some buyers already doubling their money at resale by mid-2008.

Both Meier and Stern are designing other high-rise residential buildings in New York City. Meier has designed a project at Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn, and, among other projects, Stern has designed 99 Church Street, the first non-glass-walled building proposed for the World Trade Center site. The rivalry of the two architects is also playing out elsewhere. They have designed residential high-rises just blocks apart, at the edge of Beverly Hills in Los Angeles: 9900 Wilshire by Meier and The Century by Stern. Stern and Meier differ in many respects: Stern has always taught, Meier hasn't; Stern is a prolific

author, while Meier is somewhat reserved; Stern has done a lot of work for developers, while the Perry Street buildings were among Meier's first commercial projects—he is best known for museums, among them the Getty Center in Los Angeles. However, the chief difference between the two architects is a matter of style.

To many architects, the word “style” connotes a frivolous distraction. Yet architectural styles convey meanings that people truly value—and are willing to pay for—as the high prices of luxury apartment buildings demonstrate. In this respect buildings are similar to the many other objects that consumers buy to enhance their lives. The importance of style—and of a variety of stylistic choices—is a major factor in recent economic history, and has been closely studied over the past ten years. Virginia Postrel, the author of the one of the most compelling of these studies, *The Substance of Style*, has written that “the ‘variety revolution’ is one of the biggest business stories of the past decade.”

It is no secret that architects and the public frequently disagree on the issue of style; most architects think that everything should be Modernist, while the public puts a high value on tradition—and on choice. This difference is frequently characterized as a question of taste, but for architects it is not a question

of equally valid personal choices, but an objective matter with important professional overtones.

Schools of architecture everywhere in the world teach that Modernism is not a style but the only authentic way of building. The key assumption is the value of being “truthful,” which originated with the International Style architecture of the 1920s. For the architects of that time, blank white walls and Cubist forms were intended both as a sign of purity and as a repudiation of the applied ornament that had characterized the architecture of the preceding century. In their view, “truth” was the irreducible core that was left when everything extraneous was removed. In theory, only forms with a purpose, forms that arose out of the functional circumstances of the building, were allowed. The use of style for its own sake was considered copying, and in the context of creative work, was thought to be a lie.

Some of this 1920s architecture was low-income, multifamily housing, and notwithstanding the fact that it has always been easier to experiment on the poor rather than on the rich, this involvement with housing was taken as proof of Modernism’s commitment to social progress. But beyond simply providing better built and sanitary housing for the masses, the aesthetic aim was to avoid building in a traditional manner, since traditional building, according to Modernist

teaching, encouraged a state of false consciousness, and distracted people from the realities of the modern world with nostalgic images from the past.

This academic argument came up short, however, when a Modernist architect was confronted by clients—rich or poor—who wanted gabled roofs and window shutters. As we have seen, even in the case of multifamily dwellings, where individual apartments are subordinated to a collective exterior expression, buyers frequently demand traditional architecture. Are there objective, persuasive points that an architect can make to counter the desire for traditional forms? Or is Modernism a quasi-religious dogma rather than a rational and empirically based system of professional knowledge? Are the criteria that are commonly used to judge architectural production really objective and incontrovertible?

THEORIES

To understand the antipathy of Modernist architects to historical styles, it is necessary to briefly examine two fundamental beliefs, each of which addresses aspects of truthfulness in architecture. The first concerns the *Zeitgeist*, or the spirit of the time, and refers to the notion that every period in history has a particular way of building that is uniquely appropriate (conversely,

any other way of building must be false). This belief depends on the assumption that every great period in history is dominated by a homogenous society whose material culture expressed a unity of aesthetic vision. This principle of cultural identity suggests that modern architects, too, must have a unique way of building. But the cultural identity of traditional societies had a “home town team spirit” quality that suppressed individual expression in favor of the group. In ethnic societies the difference between “us” and “them” was felt acutely. Yet if the word “modernity” has any meaning, it surely includes the freedom of the individual to live his or her life as he or she sees fit, to construct an identity freely through the expression of personal choice—and consumption.

The second Modernist belief assumes that the correct use of building materials produces a self-evident sense of honesty, often referred to as the “nature of materials.” This means that what was originally made in a given material owes its form to the constraints and possibilities inherent in the use of that material and cannot be duplicated in another material without being falsified. Wood should look like wood, stone should look like stone, and so on. Thus, the multi-paned vinyl windows of today’s suburban houses are an abomination to many architects because they mimic windows originally designed in wood.

The notion that there are truths that reside in the use of particular materials has gained many adherents over the last two hundred years, notably influential figures such as John Ruskin and Frank Lloyd Wright. Yet as early as the nineteenth century, the German architect and theorist Gottfried Semper, who studied the history of architecture from an anthropological perspective, realized that a very different phenomenon had played a decisive role throughout history. He called it *stoffwechsel*, or material change. According to Semper, when certain architectural forms attain important cultural meanings, for a variety of reasons—permanence, economy, simply availability—they are often reproduced in other materials. Thus architecture could be said to have begun when the forms of reed huts were carved into monumental stone in ancient Egypt. There was nothing “dishonest” about this, according to Semper; the forms had important meanings and were being honored by being reproduced in a new, permanent material. Similarly, over the centuries, Classical forms that were perfected in marble temples have been reproduced in a variety of materials: brick, wood, cast iron, fiberglass. According to Semper, suburban vinyl windows would be simply a version of this same phenomenon.

Semper’s ideas have an ambiguous relationship to the rise of Modernist architecture and its theoretical founda-

tions. The professed affinity of Modernism to science has been based in part on a claim to objectivity and the denial of subjective meaning. Yet this assertion has not been subjected to empirical analysis. This lack of empiricism is due in part to the fact that Modernist doctrine assumes an idealized human subject. But the human animal is a complicated and varied creature, and his relationship to cultural artifacts is accordingly complicated as well. Even the field of economics has always understood that human behavior varies according to variations in income, prices, and alternatives, and that rational decision-making is driven by emotion as well as reason.

CONSUMERS

The residential growth in downtowns across the nation has been driven by demand for luxury high-rise and low-rise multifamily housing, and can be broadly divided into three groups. The first group is empty nesters, that is, older couples returning to the city, newly liberated from familial responsibilities, whose expectations have been formed by years in the suburbs. The dominance of traditional domestic forms in suburbia means that many of these ex-suburbanites are looking for buildings that reassure by invoking continuity with *tradition*. The

second group is people who, in the prime of their lives, are newly single or are seeking a second home in the city. These individuals are interested in the city as an alternative to suburban life, and hence are attracted to *contemporary designs* that, however, are not excessively aggressive and blend with their surroundings. The third group is young professionals, sometimes married with small children, who don't want to live in the suburbs, even if their jobs are located there. This more youth-oriented segment seeks an environment on the *cutting edge*, emphasizing the excitement that the city has to offer. This is the chief market for Modernist design, whether it is expressed in a minimalist loft interior aesthetic, or a hard-edged, glass exterior expression.

These three groups are not absolute in their tastes, however. Some empty nesters, for example, may opt for industrial chic, and some young professionals may prefer traditional luxury. Moreover, they may change their preferences over time; some may spend great sums to remake their home in a given style—say Provençal—only to rip out the interior a few years later, to replace it with a minimalist decor. Consumers will buy products intended for entirely different segments and make them their own. That such things happen illustrates forcefully the point made earlier that material culture is no longer a marker of ethnic or

other difference, but an expression of personal desire, an enriching element in each individual's life journey towards fulfillment.

There are some significant regional differences in multifamily markets. The three largest markets in the United States for high-rise residential buildings are New York, Miami, and Chicago. When it comes to balconies, New Yorkers are apparently too busy to step outside for fresh air, because New York apartment buildings typically have few or no balconies. In Miami, on the other hand, wrap-around balconies are common, presumably to take advantage of the mild weather. In Chicago, despite cold and windy winters, most apartment buildings provide a small, sheltered balcony. Smaller residential markets are similar to these three cities, but not always in obvious ways. In spite of Philadelphia's proximity to New York, for example, the apartment market is similar to Chicago as far as balconies are concerned. Another difference concerns parking. Apartment buildings in Philadelphia, like their counterparts in Miami and Chicago, tend to be built directly on top of large parking garages, typically providing more than one parking space for every unit. In New York City, on the other hand, minimal parking may be provided in the basement of a building, or there may be none at all.

Figure 3: Mandeville Place, Philadelphia (Bedrock Group, developer; Richard Meier & Partners, architects).



BUILDINGS AND THEIR ARCHITECTS

Downtown Philadelphia is an interesting case study of the role that style currently plays in the design of high-rise residential buildings. At the time of writing there are five new construction condominium towers of thirty stories or more being built, or just completed, within the city's central business district. In spite of their small number, this group of buildings covers the full range of stylistic choices prevalent in today's market.

Figure 4: The Murano, Philadelphia (P&A Associates and Thomas Properties, developers; Solomon Cordwell Buenz, architects).



Figure 5: The Residences at the Ritz-Carlton, Philadelphia (ACG Partners, developers; Handel Architects).



Mandeville Place, designed by Richard Meier, is an example of the architect's signature minimal Modernist style (Figure 3). Despite the quality of its design, this high-end proposal was in a very marginal location, so when the market weakened, the project was cancelled forward. Architecture can only go so far in selling a project. Of the five buildings that are actually being built, there are two that similarly represent the Modernist floor-to-ceiling glass style. The Murano (Figure 4) and the Residences at the Ritz-Carlton (Figure 5) are designed by architects from

Chicago and New York, respectively. The Murano is a strikingly simple and elegant yet economical design, unfortunately wedded at its base to a generic parking garage. The Residences at the Ritz-Carlton are aimed at a higher price point, and while less elegant than the Murano, the building has an expensive glass curtain wall and all parking located on several floors below grade. As the name suggests, services from the adjacent Ritz-Carlton hotel are available to the residents. Both of these projects are located in business neighborhoods, and their choice of style

Figure 6: 10 Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia (ARCWheeler, developer; Robert A. M. Stern Architects).



Figure 7: Symphony House, Philadelphia (Dranoff Properties, developer; BLT Architects).



may be related to the commercial nature of the surrounding environment, although the Murano is specifically oriented to a younger demographic.

10 Rittenhouse Square, designed by Robert A. M. Stern Architects (Figure 6), and Symphony House (Figure 7), by the Philadelphia firm BLT Architects, are designed to recall the glamour of 1920s residential skyscrapers, with masonry walls and setback silhouettes. 10 Rittenhouse, which capitalizes on its location on Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia's premier

residential address, is adjacent to 1920s high rises, and no expense has been spared to match its predecessors. Parking is provided on several underground floors. Both by design, and by virtue of escalating construction costs, the building appears to have cost nearly twice as much per square foot as Symphony House.

The Murano, the Residences at the Ritz-Carlton, 10 Rittenhouse Square, and Symphony House were announced about the same time, in the midst of Philadelphia's condo boom, although

Figure 8: 1706 Rittenhouse Sq. St., Philadelphia (Scannapieco Development Corporation and Parkway Corporation, developers; Cope Linder Associates, architects).



only Symphony House is complete and occupied at the time of writing. Costs were contained by moving quickly, and starting construction immediately. Above-ground but hidden parking, and the use of lightweight carbon fiber reinforced concrete panels on the exterior, helped to hold down costs without sacrificing quality. Located on an untested site on Broad Street, some blocks from Rittenhouse Square and next to the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, the building includes a legitimate theater,

which attracted public financial support. The traditional style of the building undoubtedly played a role in attracting well-to-do buyers to a newly minted location on a timetable that met aggressive sales goals.

The fifth downtown residential high-rise is 1706 Rittenhouse Street. This building strikes a balance between Modernist and traditional styles, with the hint of a cornice on the top of its thirty-two stories of glass (Figure 8). Designed by Cope Linder Architects, the building has only one apartment per floor (like Mandeville Place), and parking located below grade in a mechanized garage. The style in this case suggests an unpretentious but luxurious lifestyle.

CONCLUSION

Modernist, traditional, and contemporary—the Philadelphia examples represent the full range of stylistic choices available to the downtown condominium buyer looking to achieve the lifestyle of his or her dreams. Traditional as well as Modernist designs remain a viable option for the developers of multifamily high-rise buildings for the simple reason that consumers demand them. The eclecticism of the marketplace for residential buildings is unlikely to change anytime soon; in fact, the available choices will only likely increase. There

is no shortage of architectural styles, for the drive to create Modernist forms has continued to produce stylistic variations over the past century and is likely to continue doing so: Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Stripped Classical, International Style, Mid-century Modern, Brutalism, Deconstruction, and Postmodernism. Perhaps sometime in the future the memory of pre-twentieth-century styles will dim in the collective consciousness, although at this time it seems unlikely, and styles such as Georgian, Tudor, and Classical remain popular. The fact that styles are not interchangeable, but have specific meanings, is the key to their allure. Otherwise they would have no power or appeal. The knowledgeable developer knows his or her market and will carefully craft his or her product to appeal to the target buyer—young or old, hip or traditional. The increasingly sophisticated and knowledgeable consumer demands choice and expects satisfaction. The architect's role is to produce designs that meet the emotional as well as the physical needs of the consumer, while meeting the economic goals of the developer. In so doing, architects must understand that eclecticism is the language of modernity.