

# VANITY FAIR

"Everyone has  
three lives: a public life,  
a private life,  
and a secret life."  
—GABRIEL GARCÍA  
MÁRQUEZ

A VANITY FAIR  
**SPECIAL  
REPORT**

## EDWARD SNOWDEN: PATRIOT OR TRAITOR?

How and Why He Did It.  
Who Helped.  
What's Next.

By BRYAN BURROUGH,  
SUZANNA ANDREWS, and  
SARAH ELLISON  
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PLUS  
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## The Performance Anxieties of the SUPER- RICH

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STATE-OF-THE-ART BOMBSHELL

# Our Miss SCARLETT

Scarlett  
Johansson's Very  
Big Year:  
Controversy,  
Blockbusters, and a  
Baby on the Way

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MAY 2014

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MAY 2014

VANITY FAIR  
agenda

ADVERTISING  
PROMOTION  
EVENTS  
OPPORTUNITIES



CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT: ARTIST CAITLIN THOMPSON, JOSH MEINDERTSMA, BRYNN SAPPY, MORRISON KEDDIE, ACTRESS AMBER HEARD, AND JULIENNE IRONS SPREADING SMILES.

### CHARITY

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ACTRESS AHNA O'REILLY AND A PATIENT AT AN ART WORKSHOP.

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### 1 Stephen Wilkes

To capture New York City's evolving skyline for "Too Rich, Too Thin, Too Tall?" (page 170), photographer Stephen Wilkes spent an afternoon in a helicopter observing Midtown Manhattan's billionaires' row, so called for its luxury high-rises. "To get a sense of the views that these apartments are going to have—it was exciting to see that," says Wilkes. An exhibition of his photographs opens at the Peter Fetterman Gallery, in Santa Monica, this fall.

### 2 Craig McDean

"She's such an intelligent, well-rounded person. You could speak to her about anything," says photographer Craig McDean of cover subject Scarlett Johansson. As a contributor to *Vogue*, *Another*, *W*, and *i-D* magazines, McDean has worked with Johansson several times over the years. "I felt very at ease shooting her again. There is that element of familiarity and trust that makes the experience so fulfilling," he adds.

### 3 Paul Goldberger

Contributing editor Paul Goldberger sees the rise of ever taller luxury residential buildings in Manhattan as a mixed blessing. While the Pulitzer Prize-winning critic admires the minimalism of some, as he admits in "Too Rich, Too Thin, Too Tall?" (page 170), the towers cast shadows across Central Park and its social landscape. Goldberger prefers New York's many pre-war buildings: "I don't really think I'm a 90th-floor-in-Midtown type of guy."

### 4 Paul Elie

It's been 25 years since Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie for his controversial, sprawling fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*. In "A Fundamental Fight" (page 180), Paul Elie, a senior fellow at Georgetown University, revisits the uproar that surrounded the book's publication. "The best writers are always a step ahead of current events," says Elie. "Rushdie was several giant leaps ahead."

# Too Rich. Too Thin. Too Tall?

Ever taller, ever thinner, the new condo towers racing skyward in Midtown Manhattan the 96th floor of 432 Park Avenue will be the highest residence  
PAUL GOLDBERGER looks at the construction, architecture, and market

attan are breaking records for everything, including price. Sold for \$95 million, in the Western world. As shadows creep across Central Park, ing of these super-luxury aeries, gauging their effect on the city's future

## PILLAR OF SOCIETY

An aerial view of One57 and the shadow it casts over Central Park, dwarfing those of its neighbors.

These days, it is not just a woman who can never be too rich or too thin. You can say almost exactly the same thing about skyscrapers, or at least about the latest residential ones now going up in New York City, which are much taller, much thinner, and much, much more expensive than their predecessors. And almost every one of them seems built to be taller, thinner, and pricier than the one that came before. Few people are inclined to mourn the end of the age of the luxury apartment building as a boxy slab. But what is replacing it, which you might call the latest way of housing the rich, is an entirely new kind of tower, pencil-thin and super-tall—so tall, in fact, that one of the new buildings now rising in Manhattan, the 96-story concrete tower at the corner of 56th Street and Park Avenue, 432 Park Avenue, will be 150 feet higher than the Empire State Building when it is finished, and taller than the highest occupied floor of the new 1 World Trade Center. And construction on an even taller super-luxury building, 225 West 57th Street, is scheduled to begin next year, so 432 Park's reign as the city's tallest residence and second-tallest skyscraper will be short-lived.

These buildings are transforming the streetscape of Midtown and Lower Manhattan, and they are transforming the skyline even more. Two new luxury apartment towers in the super-tall category are going up in Tribeca, at least so far. But the biggest impact has been in Midtown, in the blocks between 53rd and 60th Streets, where seven of the new condominiums are either under construction or planned. Four of them are on 57th Street alone, which day by day is becoming less of a boulevard defined by elegant shopping and more like a canyon lined



**IN WITH THE NEW**  
The construction site of the new Extell tower, on 57th Street between Broadway and Seventh Avenue. The building will be cantilevered over its neighbor, the Art Students League, built in 1892, at right.

by high walls. (And that's just the buildings that have been announced. There are others rumored to be in the planning stages, including one that would replace the venerable Rizzoli bookstore, also on West 57th Street.)

#### Shadowlands

If there is any saving grace to this tsunami of towers, it is in their very slenderness. From a distance they read as needles more than as boxes; what they take away from the street they give back to a skyline that has been robbed of much of its classic romantic form by the bulky, flat-topped office towers that have filled so much of Midtown and Lower Manhattan. These new buildings will not exactly turn Manhattan into a sleek glass version of San Gimignano—"the city of beautiful towers"—but thin buildings at least make for a striking skyline, and they cast thinner shadows as well.

Those shadows are no casual matter, since all of the new buildings are relatively close to Central Park, and they are arranged in an arc that extends from the southeast to the southwest corner of the park, not so different from the arc of the daily path of the sun. The impact will vary from season to season, but there is little doubt that the southern portion of the park will be in more shadow than it is today. Given the slenderness of the new towers, it might be more accurate to say that the southern end of the park is someday going to look striped.

The even more troubling shadow these buildings cast, however, is a social and economic one. If you seek a symbol of income inequality, look no farther than 57th Street. These new buildings are so expensive, even by New York standards, because they are built mainly for the global super-rich, people who live in the Middle East or China or Latin America and travel between London and Shanghai and São Paulo and Moscow as if they were going from Brooklyn to Manhattan. There have always been some people like that, at least since the dawn of the jet age, but it's only in the last decade that developers have put up buildings specifically with these buyers in mind. The Time Warner Center, at Columbus Circle, finished in 2004, was New York's trial run, so to speak, at targeting this new market for condominiums with spectacular views at exceptionally high prices. But it's a global phenomenon, with buildings such as One Hyde Park, in London, and the Cullinan and the Opus, in Hong Kong. The new 57th Street may be New York's way of playing with the big boys as far as global cities are concerned, but it comes at the price of making Midtown feel ever more like Shanghai or Hong Kong: a place not for its full-time residents but for the top 1 percent of the 1 percent to touch down in when the mood strikes.

And yet, in other ways, these buildings are absolutely characteristic of New York, which has a long and honorable tradition of skinny

towers: the Flatiron Building (completed in 1902), the now demolished Singer Building (1908), the Metropolitan Life tower (1909), and the Woolworth Building (1913). In those days, skyscrapers couldn't be too bulky, because you couldn't be that far from a window. Then fluorescent lighting, air-conditioning, sealed windows, and a preference for big, horizontal office floors took over.

Until now, that is. Today, there is more money to be made from housing people in the sky than ever before in New York City. In part, this is because a building full of apartments requires far fewer elevators than an office building with its armies of workers. Add to that the facts that people are willing to pay dearly for views, particularly of Central Park, and that they will pay an even greater premium for an apartment that occupies an entire floor—well, if you pile a lot of full-floor or half-floor apartments on top of one another and try to give all of them a park view, you pretty much end up with a very thin, very tall tower within a couple of blocks of Central Park.

"The super-tall, super-slender towers are a new form of skyscraper," Carol Willis, the founder and director of the Skyscraper Museum, in Lower Manhattan, told me. At 432 Park Avenue, which was designed by the architect Rafael Viñoly for the developers

Harry Macklowe and the CIM Group, each of the 104 apartments will occupy either a full floor or a half-floor, and the loftiest of them, a full-floor unit on the 96th floor, will be the highest residence in the Western Hemisphere, at least until the building at 225 West 57th Street goes ahead. Viñoly's penthouse has already sold for \$95 million to an unidentified buyer, which is close to \$11,500 a square foot; the average asking price in the building was close to \$7,000 a square foot, almost three times the average for Manhattan luxury condominiums last year. In exchange for parting with this kind of cash, the residents at 432 Park will be able to look down on the Chrysler Building and just about everything else in Midtown, including their neighbors at One57, the 90-story blue glass tower at 157 West 57th Street, which will be completed later this year (although a number of units are already occupied).

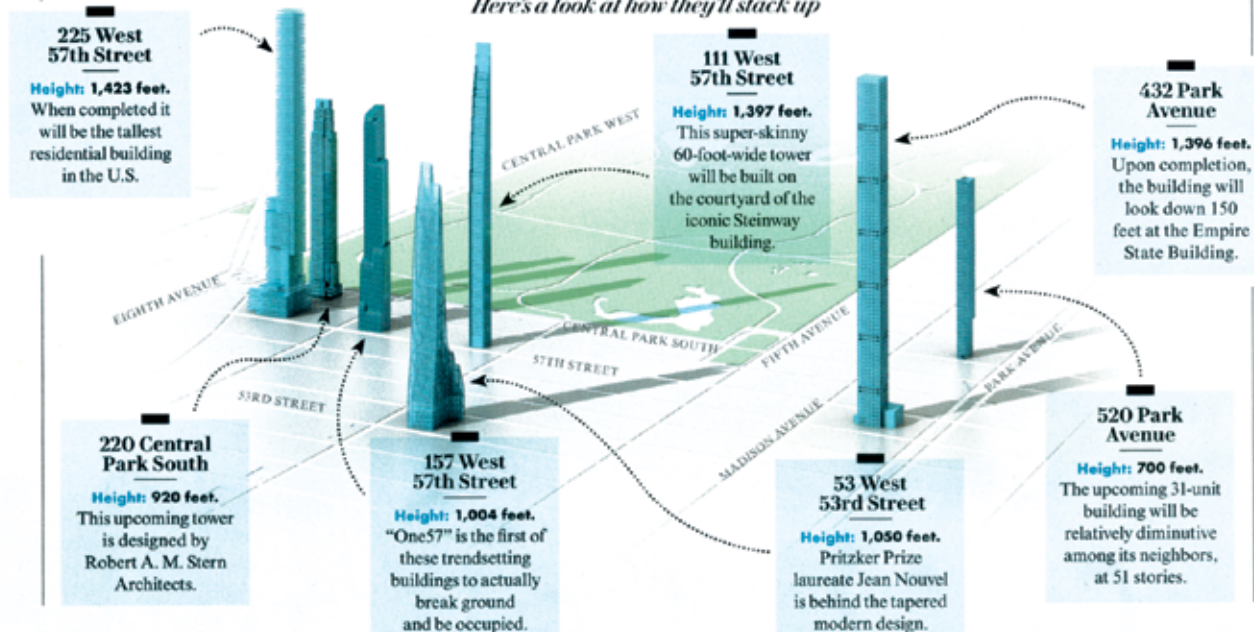
One57 was the first of this new generation of super-tall, super-thin, super-expensive buildings, and it is astonishing to think that its height of 1,004 feet, just 42 feet shorter than the Chrysler Building, will make it the tallest residential building in the city for a few months only, until 432 Park is finished, probably next year.

One57 attracted a lot of attention for the sale of one of its two largest apartments for the then unheard-of price of more than \$90 million (to an investor group headed by the financier Bill Ackman)—and a lot more attention for the fact that its crane assembly broke loose and dangled ominously over the street during Hurricane Sandy, in 2012, requiring the evacuation of seven square blocks around the building. Its developer, Gary Barnett, of Extell, spent about 10 years assembling the site, and in 2005 asked the French architect Christian de Portzamparc to come up with a design. Even before the new wave of super-tall buildings, the condominium market in New York had become much more design-sensitive, and putting the names of well-known architects like Richard Meier, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel, or Robert A. M. Stern on buildings has become a marketing advantage. In fact, at



## RACE TO THE TOP

Upon completion, the superscrapers will transform Midtown Manhattan. Here's a look at how they'll stack up



these prices it's now gotten to be something of a necessity, the same way some women will only spend \$3,000 or \$4,000 on a dress if it has a famous designer's name on it.

Unfortunately, sometimes the result seems more like the architectural equivalent of a fancy label sewn into an ordinary garment. De Portzamparc—whose first building in New York, the sculpted glass LVMH tower, on East 57th Street, was widely acclaimed—first envisioned One57 as a slender glass structure with a few setbacks marked by curving roofs; he hoped that the overall effect of the design would resemble a cascading waterfall. Once he had been through the meat grinder of the New York City development process, not much of a sense of cascading water remained, and the final version of the building turned out to be a flattened composition in various shades of blue and silver glass, striped on some sides and speckled on others. If the tower's slender height made it appropriate to New York, its garish glass made it look more like a tall refugee from Las Vegas.

Inside, however, the feeling is more luxurious, perhaps because, as Frank Lloyd Wright allegedly said about the Gothic-style Harkness Tower at Yale, the building's interior is the one place from which you can't see it. What you do see is Central Park and the city, spread out before you. Barnett, the developer, took me to the topmost penthouse on an exceptionally cold, clear day early this year, and the view of the park was nothing like what I was used to from windows 30 or 40 floors up in other buildings. From the 90th floor, you feel as connected to the sky as to the ground. The city is laid out like a map, and the enormous windows are less like frames for the view than wide-open portals to it. And inside, the high ceilings and large rooms make the place feel even less like a conventional apartment. The layout leaves an open vista through the apartment, so you can see north to the Tappan Zee Bridge and south to the new 1 World Trade Center tower.

#### High Rollers

De Portzamparc had completed the initial versions of his plans when the recession of 2008 began and real-estate development in New York ground to a halt. Barnett, a former diamond dealer whose quiet, understated manner masks a gambler's instinct, was certain that the market would come back, and that when it did, most other developers would be caught with nothing to sell. If he could manage to start his building when things still looked bleak, Barnett thought, CONTINUED ON PAGE 193

STYLING BY MICHAEL PHILIPPE. SCHECHTER'S VEST AND PANTS BY BROOKS BROTHERS; SHIRT BY POLO RALPH LAUREN. BOOTS BY FLORENTINI & BAKER; HAT FROM J.J. HAT CENTER. FONTANA'S CLOTHING BY PAUL STUART. WATCH BY PATEK PHILIPPE. SCHNEIDER'S VEST AND PANTS BY BROOKS BROTHERS; SHIRT BY CARROT & GIBBS; CUFF LINKS AND STUDS BY BROOKS BROTHERS; RING BY ASPREY. GROOMING BY JOSE. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS

MAP BY JOE LERDO/AVRAN CHARTER DESIGN



## Midtown's New Skyline



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 176 he would be ahead of the curve, the only developer ready with brand-new, super-luxury apartments when the next wave began. "We had a hole in the ground—what else could we do?" Barnett said to me as a way of justifying his decision to move forward. Still, his reasoning was counter-intuitive, since real estate usually lags economic recoveries rather than leads them. At a time when the best apartments in the city were going begging, the notion of adding a slew of new ones at higher prices than the apartments going unsold seemed nothing short of madness.

But Barnett knew he wasn't building for conventional buyers who were subject to normal economic cycles. Like Nick and Christian Candy, the brothers in London who built the absurdly expensive One Hyde Park Tower, or Arthur and William Lie Zeckendorf, another pair of siblings in the development business, who finished 15 Central Park West just before the last downturn, Barnett had no illusion that he was building homes for people to actually live in. He knew that most of the

apartments at One57 would be commodities for investment, sold to limited-liability companies that had been created to shield the identities of their rich owners, people from around the world who would spend, at most, a few weeks a year there. From time to time, Barnett figured, he would sell an apartment to a couple or a family who actually cared about what the place would feel like to wake up in every morning and to commute to work and take their children to school from, but these people, the ones for whom One57 would be a primary residence, were relatively few.

Until recently, high-end residential real estate in New York meant venerable old cooperative apartment buildings on Fifth and Park Avenues and Central Park West. How could a new building without the history and solid, dignified aura of, say, 1040 Fifth Avenue sell for prices that were even higher? But co-op buildings are strange animals, since you aren't technically buying an apartment in them but rather shares of stock in a tenant-controlled corporation that owns the building, and every buyer is required to submit to a complex process of interviews, financial disclosures, and board approvals. In a co-op, you can't hide your identity by buying your apartment in the name of a limited-liability corporation, but L.L.C.'s are an everyday occurrence in the New York City condominium market. Everything about the city's co-op buildings, on the other hand, is structured to make it impossible to treat them as commodities.

That, however, is precisely what the new condominiums are: tradable commodities, perfect for the speculatively inclined. They

are places in which to park your cash as well as yourself and maintain your privacy in the bargain. Fueling the market still more is the fact that New York real estate has been seen for a while as both safer and more reasonably priced than real estate in much of the rest of the world. However irrational the prices of the new wave of super-luxury condominiums look to New Yorkers, these properties are cheaper than their counterparts in Hong Kong and London, which have sold for as much as \$221 million. Not for nothing did Jonathan J. Miller of the real-estate appraisal firm Miller Samuel call the new condominiums "the equivalent of bank safe deposit boxes in the sky that buyers can put all their valuables in and rarely visit."

Barnett's financing partners accepted his rationale that, since the apartments in his building were going to be bought by people who were largely insulated from the effects of the recession, there was no reason to wait until the economy had fully revived to get the project started. Mere confidence that the world was not going to collapse altogether was enough. He started foundation work on One57 in 2010, when the rest of the real-estate industry, which was putting up buildings not as commodities but as places for people to live or work, was still in the dumps. De Portzamparc, in an unhappy concession to tighter economic circumstances, simplified his design, making the building's façades flatter. The design compromises were not matched by price concessions, however. One57's initial prices averaged \$5,889 per square foot,

## Midtown's New Skyline

and sales moved at such a fast clip that Extell raised the prices several times as the building was going up.

Barnett famously refused to negotiate with interested parties, and they were not permitted into the building as it was going up. They could see nothing except plans and full-scale mock-ups of kitchens, bathrooms, and views in a sales center that Extell constructed in an office building two blocks away, its rooms lined with the same marble that was being used in the actual building. The center was intended to set a tone of such elegance that haggling over price would feel unseemly. A visit began with a 45-second film of flowing water that gradually took the shape of the building, an allusion to de Portzamparc's idea of cascading water. From there a potential buyer would move into a room with a six-foot-high model of the building at its center, and then, if inclined to get serious, go through another series of doors into the mock-ups of kitchens and bathrooms. The notion was to capture the imagination and to move, step by step, from mood setting to reality.

It was enough to bring in a number of early buyers, including a Chinese mother who bought a modest (\$6.5 million) unit for her two-year-old daughter; two investors, one from Hong Kong and one from Montreal, who are behind the financial success of the Michael Kors and Tommy Hilfiger labels and who each spent around \$50 million on a full-floor unit; and Ackman, who put together a consortium of investors to buy an enormous six-bedroom duplex with a glass-enclosed "winter garden" at one of the building's highest setbacks, on the 75th and 76th floors. They are presumably counting on the possibility that in a few years the apartment will be worth several times the \$90 million they paid for it.

Barnett's success with One57 left other developers to play catch-up. He himself has been so emboldened by One57 that he decided to try to do it again only a block away, in a building at 225 West 57th Street that will have a Nordstrom department store at its base. (One57 will have a Park Hyatt hotel on its lower floors.) The Nordstrom tower, which is being designed by the Chicago architects Adrian Smith and Gordon Gill, will also be of glass, but more angular in shape than One57. And Steven Roth, of Vornado, another of the city's most active developers, has hired Robert A. M. Stern, the apostle of traditional architecture who designed 15 Central Park West, to do a super-tall tower at 220 Central Park South, just north of Barnett's Nordstrom tower. The early renderings for the Vornado tower show a thinner, more elongated version of his Central Park West building, mimicking the style of the past but recasting it into

a shape that is very much of the present.

The Vornado project and the new Extell project almost prevented each other from happening. In a sequence of events that makes clear how much New York real estate is part blood sport, part chess game, and part absurdist farce, Barnett had begun assembling the site for his building in 2005, the same year that Roth purchased an old rental apartment building at 220 Central Park South as a future development site. Barnett realized that if Roth put up a tall building on his Central Park South site it would block the all-important park views from his own site immediately to the south. So Barnett managed, without Roth's knowledge, to purchase the lease for the Vornado building's parking garage along with a small parcel in the middle of the larger development site. For more than seven years he refused to give them up, preventing Roth from redeveloping the site even after he had bought out the apartment tenants and cleared the building to prepare for its demolition. Roth sued Barnett to try to evict him from the garage, to no avail.

The deadlock lasted until last fall, when, unwilling to sacrifice the vast profits that each was preventing the other from realizing, the men made a deal under which Vornado paid Extell \$194 million for its parcel and some additional development rights and agreed to shift the site of the Stern-designed tower to the western edge of the Central Park South site. In exchange, Barnett agreed to push his tower slightly to the east, giving it a more or less open view to the park. One catch: the shift meant that the Extell tower would now be cantilevered over one of the city's most distinguished landmarks, the Art Students League. The League received nearly \$50 million for the privilege of giving Extell its development rights and permission to have the new building stick out over its roof. The Art Students League, which was designed in 1892 by Henry J. Hardenbergh, the architect of the Dakota and the Plaza hotel, is a city landmark, which means that the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission had the right to pass judgment on the design. The commission decided that having a 1,400-foot structure looming over the League building would not negatively impact the landmark. Michael Kimmelman, the architecture critic of *The New York Times*, likened the relationship between the two buildings to "a giant with one foot raised, poised to squash a poodle."

### Keeping Up Appearances

Because One57 is the first super-tall, super-thin building, it has become a lightning rod for criticism, and Barnett, who until now has been one of the city's more publicity-averse developers, has assumed the role of lead public defender of the new super-tall towers. He was the only developer who appeared on the panel at a public forum about

the new buildings last February, where he walked into a lion's den of 425 people, most of whom seemed to view the towers with feelings ranging from dismay to outrage. He followed up his appearance with a piece in *The New York Observer* in which he claimed that One57 "will generate more than \$1 billion in real estate, sales, hotel occupancy and other taxes" over the next two decades.

It is easy to think of the super-tall, ultra-luxury towers as a story more about money than about design, and to a certain degree it is. But if the first two buildings, One57 and 432 Park Avenue, are any indication, the interiors, at least, are designed to an exacting standard, with extremely high ceilings and expansive rooms to go with the awesome views, as if the developers realized that at prices upwards of \$8,000 a square foot they couldn't get away with the mean little rooms and cheap finishes that they might peddle elsewhere. As Barnett said to me, "They're getting something for their \$40 or \$50 million." (Well, yes, you'd hope.) He added, "These people don't want to get squeezed into a small box." Both buildings have elegant bathrooms that are more in line with what you would expect to find in a custom, one-of-a-kind interior than a developer-supplied one. And both buildings have spectacular kitchens, which will in all likelihood prove once again the maxim that in New York the better equipped an apartment kitchen is, the less cooking goes on within it.

Despite the garishness of One57's exterior, I'm not ready to write off the entire super-thin, super-tall building type as incompatible with serious architecture. Viñoly's 432 Park, on the outside, is as sophisticated as One57 is glitzy. Its façade is a flat, minimalist grid of smoothly finished concrete. As one looks at the building it's hard not to think of Tadao Ando, the Japanese architect who is famous for making concrete feel more sensual and luxurious than marble. To some people, concrete is still concrete, no matter how refined its finish, so you have to give Macklowe some credit for not pandering to the lowest common denominator of moneyed taste. Macklowe's own apartment, in the Plaza, was designed by the late Charles Gwathmey, who did a great deal to shape the developer's taste and gave him an obsession for detail that is more characteristic of an architect than a profit-driven builder. In the case of 432 Park, Macklowe seems not to have cut any corners; his philosophy has been to spend as much as it takes and figure he'll get it back by charging sky-high prices, like the \$74.5 million he is asking for the full-floor apartment on the 87th floor, or the \$30.75 million he wants for a three-bedroom apartment down on the 64th floor.

The tower is an essay in pure geometric form: it is a perfect square in plan, and rises straight up, without a single setback; all four façades are identical, made up of a grid of windows, every one of which is roughly 10 feet square. No windows are bigger, and no

windows are smaller. If the windows didn't have glass in them, the whole building would look like one of Sol LeWitt's tower sculptures from the 1980s.

Macklowe is trying to sell restraint and opulence at the same time, which is not an easy task. To do it, he revved up a marketing campaign that is even more elaborate than the One57 effort, with a huge sales office in the General Motors Building that, like the one for One57, replicates finishes, kitchens, and bathrooms of the apartments, which were designed by Deborah Berke, not Viñoly. There is also a hardcover book, a special magazine, and a Web site (with text in English, Russian, Portuguese, Chinese, French, and Italian) that allows you to see virtual images of finished apartments and photographs of the actual views from five selected heights. The climactic moment in the sales center comes when you see the mood-setting film, produced by the design agency dBox, that shows images of luxury—think British country houses, private jets—that morph into images of 432 Park, all to the background music of Mama Cass singing “Dream a Little Dream of Me.” Never has austerity seemed so alluringly posh, not to say decadent.

If the size of the 432 Park Avenue tower, which replaces the old Drake Hotel, seems out of scale with its surroundings—which it is—it's worth noting that it's not the first residential building in the neighborhood to have that problem. Diagonally across the street is the building that might be considered the true first super-tall, super-thin residential tower, the Ritz Tower. It was built in 1925 to the designs of Emery Roth and Carrere & Hastings, and it rose 41 stories to 541 feet, a height that seemed every bit as outrageous in the 1920s as 1,396 feet does now. Ayn Rand was almost surely referring to the ornate Ritz Tower in *The Fountainhead* when she wrote disdainfully of “a Renaissance palace made of rubber and stretched to the height of forty stories.”

Two other new towers in the 57th Street

area have to be considered as architectural efforts at least as serious as 432 Park. The first, 53 West 53rd Street, the tapered tower beside the Museum of Modern Art, was designed by Jean Nouvel several years ago for the Hines development firm but has been delayed since 2009. The tallest tower that is not on a wide street or avenue, it has gained some notoriety because of MoMA's plans to expand into its lower floors and in the process demolish a small architectural gem, the former American Folk Art Museum, built in 2001.

### On the Up-and-Up

And then there is 111 West 57th Street, designed by the architectural firm SHoP, which will be the thinnest tower of all, and quite possibly the most elegant: 1,397 feet, balanced on a base only 60 feet wide. The builders of 111 West 57th are Kevin Maloney of Property Markets Group and Michael Stern, the head of JDS Development Group. Stern broke into the Manhattan luxury market just recently by converting an old Art Deco telephone-exchange building on West 18th Street into the exceptionally sophisticated—and exceptionally successful—Walker Tower. Stern is a passionate enthusiast of New York architectural history (he named the 18th Street building for its original architect, Ralph Walker), and he seems genuinely eager to add to that history.

His tower, which will be sheathed mostly in glass on its north and south sides and will have supporting walls covered in bronze and terra-cotta on the east and west, will be slipped beside, and rise above, another landmark, the handsome, limestone-clad office building that houses Steinway Hall, the ornate piano showroom, at its base. SHoP's design partners, Gregg Pasquarelli and Vishaan Chakrabarti, said that what they wanted most of all was to design a building that would feel as if it belonged in New York and no other place—that “has the DNA of New York, so you will know it wasn't plucked off the skyline of Shanghai or

Hong Kong,” as Pasquarelli said to me. The building will rise straight up on its northern side, facing the park, but on the south it will gently set back in a series of steps so that the north-south dimension of the tower gradually gets thinner and thinner until it has no depth at all at the top and becomes just a glass wall at the building's crown. It is a subtle and graceful re-interpretation in modern form of the stepped-back, “wedding cake” towers of New York's past, seasoned by a sprinkling of a classic New York material, terra-cotta, all put together in a way that makes deft use of today's technology. Of all the new towers, it is the only one that gets ever more delicate as it rises, ending not with a climactic crown but by almost disappearing into the sky.

These buildings have already given the 21st-century skyline the same kind of shock that the Ritz Tower gave it in the 1920s, when living 40 stories into the sky seemed brazen. Whatever impact all of this has on the cityscape, it will also have an effect on the handful of people who will live in these buildings, many of whom probably see these aceries as a chance to distract themselves from the ordinary woes that mere mortals suffer on the ground.

Can height buy happiness? A few years after the Ritz Tower opened, the Waldorf Towers climbed even higher. Cole Porter maintained an apartment there for years. Could that be why he wrote a song that ended with the words “down in the depths of the ninetieth floor”? □

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