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OCULUS

Home, Sweet Home?

New Houses and Housing by New York Architects

THE WINTER HOUSE. MORRIS/SATO STUDIO. MODEL/PHOTOGRAPH: YOSHIRO SATO

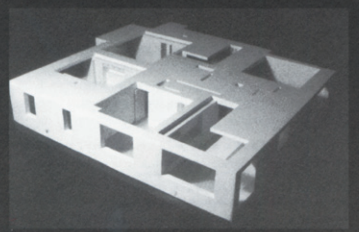
home, sweet home?

Houses by New York Architects

by Jayne Merkel

Tribeca Pointe, Battery Park City, Gruzen Samton Architects

left: Grange Road Condominiums, Singapore, Pei Partnership
right: Garden facade, East Village Apartment Building, Manhattan, Belmont Freeman Architects



Eisenman Davidson apartment, Greenwich Village, Resolution: 4 Architecture

We may soon be living in fishbowls linked both by electronic communications and the global economy, as the The Un-private House exhibition at MoMA contends. But some recent residential projects by New York architects suggest a contradictory trend. They take pride in place and concede to the context. It isn't surprising, actually, that these trends coexist, since change usually triggers reactions and local character is prized in this fast-changing and increasingly homogeneous world.

Where contextualism overlaps post-industrial modernism, as in recent conversions and renovations of Manhattan lofts, our native traditions are being emulated around the world. New York lofts (by **Hanrahan+Meyers, Frank Lupo / Daniel Rowen Architects,** and the **Kolatan / Mac Donald Studio**) make appearances in the MoMA show, even though it is devoted to "houses." And lofts' wide-open spaces (along with those of open plan, early-modern houses) show up in the MoMA exhibit's American-style single-family houses built in Europe, Argentina, and Japan. In fact, eleven of the 26 firms in the exhibition are Manhattan-based. And since so many of us work abroad, New York architects' influence is widespread—even though most market-rate, new residential building here is spectacularly uninspired.

The **Pei Partnership** has drawn on prewar New York apartment plans for the Grange Road Condominiums, on embassy row in Singapore, a venture that stalled during the Asian financial crisis. Construction, however, is expected to begin next spring. All three towers have relatively small floor plates, so the apartments, which range between 2,000 and 4,000 square feet, occupy full floors with windows on all four exposures. The buildings are twenty stories high, though there are only 38 units in the whole complex, because many apartments are duplexes. "I'm rather pleased with how they all nest together spatially," Sandi Pei said, adding that the interior layouts resemble prewar apartments in "how you enter and how you move from room to room" (though, admittedly, some living spaces flow into others).

The three freestanding towers in the complex are sited on one-and-three-quarter acres in a lush residential area. Views will be verdant since trees overhang the ambassadors' residences in the

neighborhood, which tend to be stone or stucco, with tile roofs. But Pei's airy stone-and-aluminum Grange Road Condominiums will not be the only tall buildings in the area. A version of Habitat, by **Moshe Safdie,** and a sculpturesque tower by **Paul Rudolph** are located nearby.

Robert A.M. Stern has been drawing on prewar prototypes for so long that he's become famous for it. Currently, Stern's picture is being used in real estate ads for his Chatham, on East 65th Street (designed with **Ismael Leyva**). But Stern's firm is also responsible for one of the more interesting large apartment towers in Battery Park City (with **Costas Kondylis**). At Tribeca Park, as the 396-unit complex is called, the architects created a waterfront street wall overlooking the Hudson River. It is reminiscent of Riverside Drive, but departs "from the genteel Upper Westside esthetic" of Battery Park City "in favor of a tougher, bolder, vocabulary of hard edges, bold bracketed overhangs, and colossally scaled columnar elements that we believe will visually unite it with the nearby Tribeca warehouse district." The building has a metal cornice like old industrial structures nearby and a wooden water tower on the roof, like buildings all over this city. In the massing of the 453,000-square-foot project, which follows guidelines established by the Battery Park City Authority master plan, a variety of building heights—each responding to the adjoining streets—breaks down the scale. A 27-story tower punctuates the intersection of the Chambers Street pedestrian corridor and the River Terrace street wall.

Across the street, **Gruzen Samton** took cues from the neighborhood, from Battery Park City design guidelines, and from the firm's own 1993 Stuyvesant High School. The materials for Gruzen Samton's 41-story Tribeca Pointe—limestone, granite, yellow and orange brick—were selected to be compatible with those of the school, which it touches. Generous use of glass helps establish a second, larger scale and relates to the shiny skins of commercial buildings in the World Financial Center, to the south. And the extensive windows maximize spectacular views that the height and the site afford the 340 apartments.

On the north side, the building had to respond to the river and the West Side Highway. But, at 400 feet tall, the tower had to relate to the Manhattan grid as well. A curved wall pulls the two grids together and serves as a kind of lighthouse for the north end of Battery Park City, with a clear presence on the skyline. (Meanwhile, with the real estate market sizzling, Gruzen Samton has been commissioned to design another apartment complex to be built south of Stern's, and a Brookdale Living Community for seniors is going up on the east (OCULUS, September 1998, p. 13).)

The real estate boom gave **Belmont Freeman** the chance to design his first from-the-ground-up building in New York City—a seven-story East Village apartment house on Eighth Street, near Avenue B. The plan of the seven two-bedroom units is intended to appeal to unrelated roommates. From identical bedrooms, each person will have access to the angled balcony facing the garden and to the open living, dining, and kitchen areas. The project's six one-bedroom units, which face the street, also have balconies accessible from their bedrooms. At ground level a curved wall leads out to the garden—the stucco, concrete block, and stone building with metal details is strongly geometric.

Freeman's design meets the standards of the Quality Housing Program, within the New York City Zoning Resolution, which provides bonus footage for amenities such as a windowed laundry room, a common roof terrace, and generous room sizes.

More Space for Fewer People

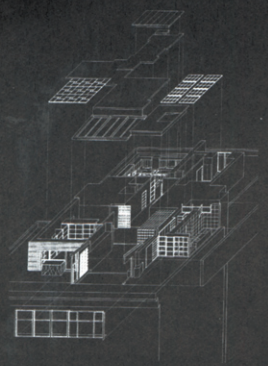
Although it's hard to argue with inducements for quality, bonuses encouraging additional size hardly seem necessary now. In new Manhattan apartments—especially those designed by architects of note—the trend is toward larger "family" units, even though demographics suggest that traditional families are becoming rarer. Fifty percent of households now consist of a couple with no children at home; another quarter of residences are occupied by singles. The concentration of wealth in households at the top has also led to demand for ever-larger units. In the 1960s, developers were subdividing large, traditional apartments or creating studios and tiny one-bedrooms, but today several small units are often combined.

In a big, white-brick postwar building in Greenwich Village, **Smith-Miller + Hawkinson** put three studios together to create an elegant loftlike penthouse for gallery director Frederieke Taylor and her art collection. In the same building, **Resolution: 4 Architecture** combined three other units on a high floor for the family of Peter Eisenman and Cynthia Davidson. As if working for another architect weren't hard enough, partner-in-charge of the Eisenman-Davidson project, **Joe Tanney,** explained that the 1900-square-foot apartment "provided some interesting constraints because many of the risers and shafts that serve the upstairs penthouses cross over in the space. As a result, he had to work with very limited ceiling heights. But the south, west, and northern views made it worth the effort, and he was able to create three bedrooms and baths, an eat-in kitchen, a large-and-open family living space that is predominantly white, and a library/study for Eisenman's extensive book collection. For special dinners, the study doubles as a dining room.

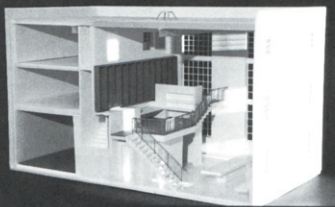
The life cycles of some New York apartments are amazing. On Central Park South, a penthouse that **Edward I. Mills & Associates Architects** is redesigning was transformed—just fourteen years ago—by the late **Alan Buchsbaum.** For previous owners Billy Joel and Christy Brinkley, Buchsbaum created a "casual loft" with a state-of-the-art sound system, eye-popping colors, and a diagonal axis. Then, for a later renovation that was never completed, Buchsbaum's scheme was demolished by an interim owner. Now, for a couple that has traveled extensively in Asia and likes Japanese design, Mills is giving the apartment, with its spectacular views and two thousand square feet of terraces, a cool and highly structured feel.

From the small vestibule, an elaborate cherry gate opens to a stone-floored entry. To one side, the view of the park is approached using a gently ascending series of paired, cascading steps and broad platforms clad in dark walnut. Dining, living, and sitting areas are defined merely by slight changes in level. Family, exercise, and dressing rooms are separated by partial-height partitions of wood and art plaster or by sliding shoji screens. Millwork of teak and beech is used throughout, as are various types of stone. In a showstopping feature, the ventless fireplace in the family room, one of three in the apartment, is surrounded by glass that permits a simultaneous view of Central Park.

Kitchen countertops in an apartment **Specht Harpman Design** remodeled for a filmmaker on lower Fifth Avenue are made from stone as well—a rare North American stone called Crow's Foot that looks like calligraphy—but the similarities stop there.



Central Park South penthouse, Manhattan, Edward I. Mills & Associates Architects



Yoshiko Sato

above: Winter House, Falls Village, Connecticut, Morris/Sato Studio
below: Pearce/Quinn Loft, Tribeca, Morris/Sato Studio

Michael Moran

Kevan Residence, East Hampton, New York, Lynne Breslin Architecture

Like most New Yorkers, this client had the problem of packing his life into a very small space. In fact, the scheme is included in the forthcoming 1999 Hearst book *Big Ideas for Small Spaces*, edited by Il Kim and James Trulove.

Asked to inexpensively create an ordered, elegant space with as much storage as possible in a prewar building that was once a hotel, the architects decided to make one Big Room from two smaller ones. A sliding translucent wall can slip into its "case" for an open feeling or slide closed to divide the living-and-sleeping area.

An important feature of the big room concept is a cabinetry "wrapper" which deforms to become a desk, serves as the case for the sliding door, provides bookshelves and display space, and becomes seating at the windows. The wrapper accommodates a variety of needs within the simple shell of the apartment built with a continuous palette of translucent acid-etched glass, pearwood flooring, and cherry doors and cabinetry. And despite the extremely limited budget (What else is new?) the wrapper is composed of custom-made cabinetry.

"The key to the design," Louise Harpman explained, "was to open the two cubicle-type spaces so that the window wall could read as one surface. By seeing the four windows connected in series, one can read an array rather than a centered composition"—an optical trick that allows the space to feel much larger than it actually is. "The array allows the space to become legible at the scale of the city, rather than internal to the scale of the rooms."

Export Lofts

The **Morris/Sato Studio,** which is famous for a classic Tribeca apartment featured both in the Meyer Rus book *Loft* (OCULUS, Dec. 1998, p. 7) and *Architectural Digest*, is currently creating something of a loft in northwestern Connecticut for graphic designers Jessica Helfand and William Drenttel. The Winter House—or the Colossus of Falls Village, as it is affectionately known—is a 32-foot-high, 60x32-foot concrete studio that once belonged to the muralist Ezra Winter. (Winter decorated the lobby of Radio City Music Hall.) Morris/Sato Studio's renovation converts the long-neglected 7,000-square-foot space into a live/work studio and home for the couple and their two young children.

The architects first carved private family living quarters and a private library from half of the gigantic shoe box. Now under construction is the technologically contemporary studio on the unimproved side. The architect's new 12x8-foot glass, painted wood, and metal sliding door will lead to a staggered mezzanine for Helfand's and Drenttel's work areas. They overhang a lavatory and an office kitchenette adjacent to the employees' spaces.

Recalling the muralist's strong diagonals, vertical light from one of the 25-foot-high windows will draw the visitor diagonally through the space. A tall slot-window on the south facade will symmetrically echo this natural light. And on the third and fourth floors, interior windows will illuminate the master bedroom suite with the glow from a 25-foot-high exterior window on the north.

The idea, as in Michael Morris and Yoshiko Sato's dramatic renovation of the 1865 landmark cast-iron Pearce/Quinn loft, in Tribeca, is to evoke the mythic aura of the former use while transforming the space to accommodate new functions. (That