

# THE REAL DEAL

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## Starchitects let loose

Thanks to bold materials and design, building façades will never look the same

By Steve Cutler

In the past, you could build any old steel-and-glass box and sell it for big bucks. But the all-glass façade is so 20th century – unless it's formed into the shape of billowing sails, like on the Frank Gehry-designed IAC headquarters on 11th Avenue, or it's broken into 1,650 fragments, as on Jean Nouvel's building next door.

With starchitect-struck new buyers craving buildings with unique aesthetics, developers are letting the brightest and boldest designers have their way with the façades on new construction. The streets of New York City – particularly Downtown, on the West Side – will never look the same.

"Because the general public is more sensitive to architecture, developers find merit in exploring new things," observes architect Annabelle Selldorf.

Architects are therefore using old- and new-school materials – like black brick, terra cotta, stainless steel and other metals – on the outer surface of their buildings. They're also utilizing novel shapes that make the structures distinctive models of modern engineering.

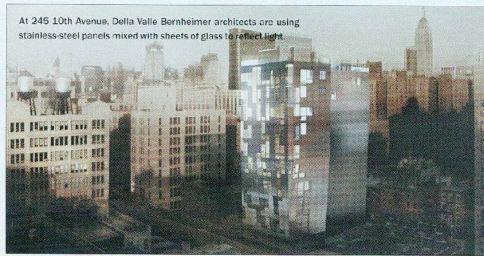
"The new generation of these buildings started with the Perry Street buildings by Richard Meier," says Selldorf. Among the first of the new crop of luxury condos sold as works of art, the Meier buildings on the West Village waterfront, completed in 2002, helped spawn a legion of see-through towers.

There's now a bit of a backlash to using glass, however, that's partially caused by practical concerns. "New materials are being invented because some of the old materials are too expensive," according to John Cetra, principal of Cetra/Ruddy architects, which recently designed a new condo at 51 Walker Street.

Glass's popularity has driven up its price. "There's been an infatuation with glass in the last couple of years," says Cetra, "and window-wall systems that would have cost \$75 a square foot a couple of years ago are now over \$95 a foot, and some go for over \$110 a foot."

Glass manufacturers make their biggest profits off of giant developments, often leaving more modestly sized condo projects in the lurch. "Why would [the manufacturers] provide glass for a job that's 130,000 square feet when they've got one million-square-foot jobs lined up?" asks Cetra, who did not use glass on the façade of the nine-story 51 Walker. And with demand for glass as strong as it's been, he adds, "the [manufacturers] can't meet their deadlines because they have a backlog of projects. It's caused us to look for other materials."

Terra cotta, for example, is enjoying a renaissance. The fired clay was a popular cladding for office buildings constructed in early 20th century New York, such as the Flatiron and Woolworth buildings. Selldorf is using the material on 320 West 19th Street, an 11-



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story condominium under construction in West Chelsea. An area historically occupied mostly by warehouse buildings, West Chelsea has become a showcase for adventurous residential architecture. The area is home to the Frank Gehry-designed headquarters of Internet powerhouse IAC/InterActive Corp., which officially opened last month.

The terra cotta on the façade of 320 West 19th Street will be glazed midnight blue. "I always thought it fascinating to use old craft in a slightly different way," says Selldorf. "It's used here in a graceful, curving design that highlights not only its functionality and durability, but [also] its elegance and unique craftsmanship."

Selldorf admires terra cotta for its tactility. The glass in the building's façade, she says, "allows reflected light to reveal the depth and particularities of the glaze on the terra cotta."

Selldorf also uses terra cotta on 200 11th Avenue, another building under construction in West Chelsea. The 19-story condominium will have a striking glazed terra-cotta base. Large stainless-steel panels will cover much of the façade, rising out of the base. Selldorf went with stainless steel over her initial choice, sand-cast aluminum, because it is easier to cast in large pieces and because, she says, "stainless steel absorbs light. It's not a shiny or sparkly surface, and it's slightly reflective of the sky."

The Oculus, under construction at 50 West 15th Street, designed by FXFOWLE Architects, also has terra cotta lining its façade. The surface provides a canvas for oversized Wausau-brand windows and stainless-steel railed balconies.

Stone is also being used on building façades in innovative ways. Architect Winka Dubbeldam displays marble in a new light on V33, a condominium under construction at 33 Vestry Street, by cutting it thin enough to reveal its translucence.

Located on a vacant lot in Tribeca, a landmarked district, the building aims to capture the qualities of the historic loft buildings in the neighborhood rather than trying to copy them exactly. The goal, Dubbeldam said, was to use materials commonly seen on Tribeca buildings, including marble and glass.

"The translucent marble is a modern translation, but it's still marble," Dubbeldam says. By cutting the marble thin, "the stone by day will be translucent on the inside," she says, while presenting a shiny exterior to the outside. "By night it turns around. The light from the inside will make it translucent to the outside."

The Chelsea Stratus, a new 40-story condominium at 101 West 24th Street, towers over its mid-rise neighbors. To mitigate the building's formidable size, SLCE Architects used reddish-brown cast stone set in raised patterns against the vast lengths of glass on the façade. "We felt that height is not a bad thing," says SLCE architect Jim Davidson, "as long as you make it svelte."

The stone, he says, "is reminiscent of the brownstones that used to be in that part of Chelsea," and it was introduced onto what might otherwise have been an all-glass ex-

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terior “to give it interest – shake it up a bit.”

Zinc also is making an appearance more often these days. The Indigo, a 13-story boutique condominium being built at 125 West 21st Street in Chelsea, uses the metal in a grid pattern to offset the glass in its façade.

“Zinc has depth,” says architect Dan Kaplan of FXFowle, Indigo’s designer. “It’s not dull or shiny and doesn’t look like painted metal.” The façade also will sport cobalt blue stripes weaving up through the zinc from the building’s massing.

“Zinc is an amazing material,” says Dubbeldam, who used the metal at the top of 497 Greenwich Street, a condominium off Spring Street. “Zinc weathers beautifully and doesn’t need any maintenance. It has beautiful patterns and gets really good rhythm in the sun. It’s a seamless material.”

Sheet metal is also increasingly popular. Cetra/Ruddy used sheet metal panels on the façade of 51 Walker Street to help the new condominium blend in with the neighborhood’s old industrial buildings, clad in cast iron. Architects are more closely aligned with the manufacturing process than ever, using computers to generate patterns, shapes and ornamentation that can be sent as data to a manufacturer for production.

At 245 10th Avenue, an 11-story West Chelsea condominium under construction along the High Line, architectural firm Della Valle Bernheimer used stainless-steel panels stamped with diamond-faceted patterns mixed with large sheets of glass to reflect the light changing throughout the day.

“We were searching for a contextual grounding that had something to do with the specifics of the industrial character of the neighborhood,” recalls architect Jared Della Valle. “Instead of going the direct route, a big, hulking steel structure, we went with a more romantic thought of the steam clouds that were generated from the trains that used to ride along the High Line.”

Each stainless steel panel on the façade is embossed using a machine called a CNC (computer numerically controlled)

turret punch, a kind of Selectric typewriter that types (virtually) on metal. “We took the images of steam clouds from trains and digitized them,” explains Della Valle.

Another of Della Valle Bernheimer’s façades, that of 459 West 18th Street, an 11-story boutique condominium under way in West Chelsea, is one of several black-painted projects now springing up around the city.

“Black has a sensibility that is always understood,” says Della Valle. “It has a strong presence, and now people are interested in abstraction and the presence and severity of it – and the subtlety of it, and how it can distort or hide. It has the power to influence perception, making a building smaller or bigger.”

At the West 18th Street project, says Della Valle, “We have a building that reads as a fairly totemic black monolith with these large punches in it. The top of the building is made of white glass to invert the experience and connect the building to the sky around it, so it’s not so intense.”

“I find it interesting that so many people think the same thing at the same time,” says Selldorf, who used black brick on 413 West 13th Street, a high-profile retail building in the Meatpacking District. Nearby, at 366 West 15th Street, the SHoP Architects-designed Porter House condominium, completed in 2003, features a striking black zinc-front building added onto an existing brick building at the base.

The FXFowle-designed Onyx Chelsea, at 261 West 28th Street, will be clad with metal panels, painted black, through which are woven sheets of elegantly layered glass and floating vertical bands of light. Also, the rear of Jean Nouvel’s 100 11th Avenue in West Chelsea will have a black brick rear façade, a striking contrast to the multi-faceted window display in the front. The project has more than 1,650 individually designed windowpanes.

The trend seems to have legs. Indeed, says Della Valle, “black is the new black.” **TRO**