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## Seductive Machines for City Living

By [NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF](#)

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In today's [Manhattan](#), there are few better ways to assume the mantle of sophistication than shelling out millions to live in a building designed by a famous architect. The result is a surfeit of architects pumping out emblems of conspicuous consumption.

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Jean Nouvel's residential building in SoHo updates the cast-iron structures of that neighborhood.

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Archpartners 2007

A rendering of Mr. Nouvel's West 19th Street apartment building, with windowpanes set at different angles.

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But on occasion the result is also exquisite architecture.

Two new residential buildings designed by the French architect Jean Nouvel even raise the possibility that hedonistic materialism is good for the soul. Both buildings — one nearing completion in SoHo, the other just getting under way in Chelsea — are being marketed as collectibles for the ultra-rich, but they are more than baubles.

Their dreamy lobbies and sleek apartments conjure the kind of voyeuristic fantasy that, as Hitchcock understood, makes city life so tantalizing. At the same time they take their cues from the rough edges — empty lots, blank brick walls, rooftop graffiti — that express New York's essential gritty identity.

Of the two the SoHo building is the more restrained. Its muscular steel frame rises on Grand Street between Broadway and Mercer, formerly a light-manufacturing area, later an art mecca and now a trendy shopping district overrun with tourists. The neighborhood's once-derelict cast iron-frame buildings are now prized real estate.

Mr. Nouvel doesn't reject this history; he tips his hat to it, showing us what can be accomplished through ingenious planning and calculated consideration of the setting. The building's heavy steel frame, for instance, can be read as an updated version of those cast-iron structures that give SoHo its industrial character. The height of its five-story base loosely follows the cornice line of the masonry buildings along Broadway, and the upper floors are set

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Ateliers Jean Nouvel 2007

An interior of the West 19th Street building designed by Jean Nouvel, showing the variation in the windows.

back from the street to make room for large terraces, at eye level with the nearby rooftops.

Architects will doubtless notice how the steel I-beams framing the exterior play on the formal elegance of Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building uptown, perhaps the city's greatest Modernist landmark. They also bring to mind the glass-and-steel grids of [Richard Meier's](#) recent residential towers on the West Side Highway at Perry Street and Charles Street.

Mr. Meier's finely detailed creations suggest the cool precision of a Swiss watch, but Mr. Nouvel is after something more slyly playful. Mr. Meier likes his steel white; Mr. Nouvel, battleship gray. The I-beams in Mr. Nouvel's SoHo building are set flush with the glass, giving it a taut profile. The rear, overlooking a narrow empty lot that will be transformed into a private garden, is treated as a raw concrete wall punctured by unadorned windows: the kind of blank side wall we associate with humdrum tenements.

There are other signs that this building is not ready to conform. In a rather strained note, an odd trellis-like structure decorated with blue glass louvers wraps over the building's top corner, a kind of contemporary cupola meant to contrast with the dome of the 1909 Police Building a few blocks away. Horizontal bands of dark blue and red glass interrupt the purity of the street facades. On warm days big mechanized glass panels set into the facade — essentially moving walls — will slide open, transforming the apartments into covered terraces and giving the building the appearance of an elaborate machine.

Mr. Nouvel has played this trick before — most notably in his Nemausus housing project in Nîmes, France — to allow the messiness of the apartments to spill into view, breaking down the distance between the building's inner life and the life of the street. (Picture, if you will, how much livelier the SoHo building would be with satellite antennas and clotheslines strung between the windows.)

It's only when you step inside that you experience the building's underlying hedonism. The lobby, not yet finished, is conceived as a vertical slot, extremely high and narrow, framed by windows overlooking a leafy tree-filled garden on one side; on the other, panels of reflective glass are superimposed with black-and-white images of a forest.

As you proceed through the lobby, the images will dissolve into spectral scenes, a haunting fairy tale landscape of trees, real and fake, and shadowy figures. A slot of glass laid into the lobby floor allows you to peek down at an underground pool in which residents will be visible bathing surrounded by white marble.

Real estate agents, no doubt, have promised glimpses of a dripping wet [Uma Thurman](#) (who has been dating André Balazs, the building's developer), although you're more likely to spot an overweight bond trader. But who cares? The point is titillation. And once you enter the apartments, the views are truly stupendous: elaborate cornices, wrought iron facades, wood water towers and rooftop graffiti.

By comparison Mr. Nouvel's building on the West Side Highway has an unvarnished, raucous quality. Scheduled for completion in late 2008, it will rise on 19th Street across from [Frank Gehry's](#) sparkling new IAC building, which might well have inspired Mr. Nouvel to pump up the glitz factor.

As with the SoHo Building, Mr. Nouvel makes a starkly classical distinction between the back and the formal public facade. The north and east exterior walls, which don't face

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the street, will be fashioned out of crude black concrete blocks punctured by irregularly sized windows. The full beauty of the building doesn't reveal itself until you circle around to the front, a gleaming glass-and-steel mask that wraps around its southwest corner.

That beauty emerges from the complexity of the glass facade. The 1,650 window panes in its glass-and-steel grid are set at different angles, so that each will be imbued with subtly different qualities of light and reflection. Portions of the facade will seem to shimmer like the surface of water at times, and at others be more opaque. The silhouette will glow like a torch one minute and dissolve into the surrounding skyline the next.

Heightening the sense of surprise is the facade's relationship to the interior. At ground level a protective glass barrier creates a transitional zone between the street and the restaurant and lobby. Terraces will bridge the space overhead. Down below, the back of the lobby is anchored by a tranquil garden, luring you deeper into the space.

Over all it's a heady alternative to the austere, buttoned-down tone of, say, Park Avenue's residential buildings. For those who can afford it, why not? For the rest of us Mr. Nouvel's buildings make fetching architectural eye candy.

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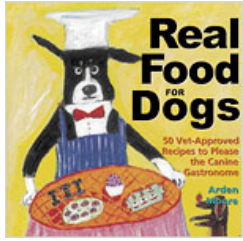
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