



## The old new

By David Kaufman

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New York's Nolita neighbourhood, just north of Little Italy, is one of the city's most historic. Once famous for its mafia shoot-outs, it is now a favourite of media and fashion types who frequent the boutiques and restaurants that lie along its shady streets.

Yet while Nolita abounds in charm, it lacks a corresponding supply in real estate. Comprised mostly of red-brick tenement apartment buildings, as opposed to the open warehouse lofts of SoHo or the new-build towers that have risen elsewhere in the city, the neighbourhood's living spaces are cramped and downright old. Add in New York's notoriously strict rent control and land-marking laws, and the hurdles to both development and redevelopment become plain.

But there are signs of change afoot. The Candle Building on Spring Street – a late 19th-century property which News Corp heir Lachlan Murdoch notoriously acquired several years ago with a view to turning it into a single family home – has instead been converted into a trio of contemporary condominiums. Even more strikingly, at 211 Elizabeth Street, architects Roman and Williams have finally given the neighbourhood a new-build development – a seven-storey project modelled on the highly crafted buildings that were a hallmark of New York at the turn of the 20th century.

Fitting seamlessly into their historic surroundings, these developments are indicative of a new trend in New York real estate. At the highest end, the new architectural aesthetic appears to be inspired by the old. Developers, architects and homebuyers have traded the glass, steel and slate of towers they favoured earlier this decade for the limestone, brick and granite of the city's prewar buildings. From TriBeCa to the Upper West Side, Nolita to Columbus Circle, the latest residential projects are old New York on the outside, new New York within.

It remains to be seen how these homes will sell in today's softening market. But the response from critics and architectural activists, such as Andrew Berman,

executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, has been positive. “These buildings must strike the right historical tone,” he says. “The devil here is always in the details.”

Take 211 Elizabeth, for example. The red bricks in the façade – Nolita’s traditional vernacular – cost up to \$300 each and were hand-laid by specialist masons from Queens. “It just fits into the neighbourhood,” explains Roman and Williams principal Robin Standefer. “The cost wasn’t necessarily higher than glass-walled construction, but this kind of detailing work had not been done for so long.”

The 15 apartments inside are meanwhile pure 21st century, with Danish wood kitchen counters, 9ft glass doors dividing dining from living rooms, marble bathrooms – with prices that started at \$1.5m, rising to \$7m.



Superior Ink Townhouses

Brick appears in an even more elaborate development in the West Village, which pairs a 15-storey, 68-unit tower with seven semi-detached \$12m-\$18m townhouses, each offering 3,800-4,800 sq ft of interior-designed living space, on the site of the former Superior Ink factory just along the Hudson River. Developer Related Companies and architects Robert A.M. Stern expect to finish construction later this spring and sales – while

slower this year – have been impressive, with only 10 per cent of units in the tower and half the townhouses still available.

“Clients began wanting an alternative to glass and steel; they’re now embracing quality over trends,” says David Wine at Related. “Many of the newer residences in the West Village are loft conversions but our project was purposely designed as residential,” adds Stern, who has put cream-coloured moulding on the building to set off Superior Ink’s red-brick façade.

Stern did the same at the most successful new-build New York residence of recent years – 15 Central Park West, just off Columbus Circle on the Upper West Side. A pair of buildings were designed to evoke the art deco style of early 20th-century American architect Rosario Candela and wrapped in limestone from the quarry that also supplied the Empire State Building. The result blends in with what Dolly Lenz at estate agency Prudential Douglas Elliman calls “wonderful, old-style” neighbours, including the Dakota, the San Remo and the Beresford.

Instead of kitchens that Stern calls “tiny, mere afterthoughts”, those at 15 Central Park West are oversized and light-drenched. And there is a health club, pool and screening room on site.

This old-new combination clearly appealed to wealthy Manhattanites, who snapped up all 200 apartments last year, pushing prices to nearly \$10,000 per sq ft even as economic calamity loomed. Buyers included the musician Sting, actor Denzel Washington and Nascar driver Jeff Gordon.

Several blocks north and west is the rapidly rising 535 West End Avenue at 86th Street. Twenty storeys high and designed by Lucien Lagrange, this development’s exterior is red brick and limestone, with the arched windows and bowed façade typical of industrial-era downtown, while its apartments are modern and massive – 3,800-8,500 sq ft with up to six bedrooms.

“We wanted a building with classical architecture; a glass tower would have felt out of place on the Upper West Side,” explains Gary Barnett, president of Extell, the developer. But inside, Lagrange adds, there are “large kitchens and family rooms but also nicely detailed living and dining rooms for more formal dinners. This is not like the openness of a loft but nor is it like a traditional Upper East Side apartment – rather something in the middle.”

Again, buyers have responded. Sixty per cent of the units are sold, with the remaining priced between \$8.5m and \$25m.

With much of New York’s real estate market at a standstill, it’s too soon to tell whether the embrace of classic and contemporary is a passing fad. As Berman acknowledges: “I’m happy to see a more diverse architectural vocabulary now in use, but it’s hard to say if these projects will truly have staying power.”