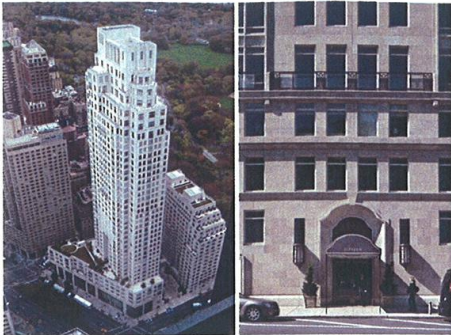


ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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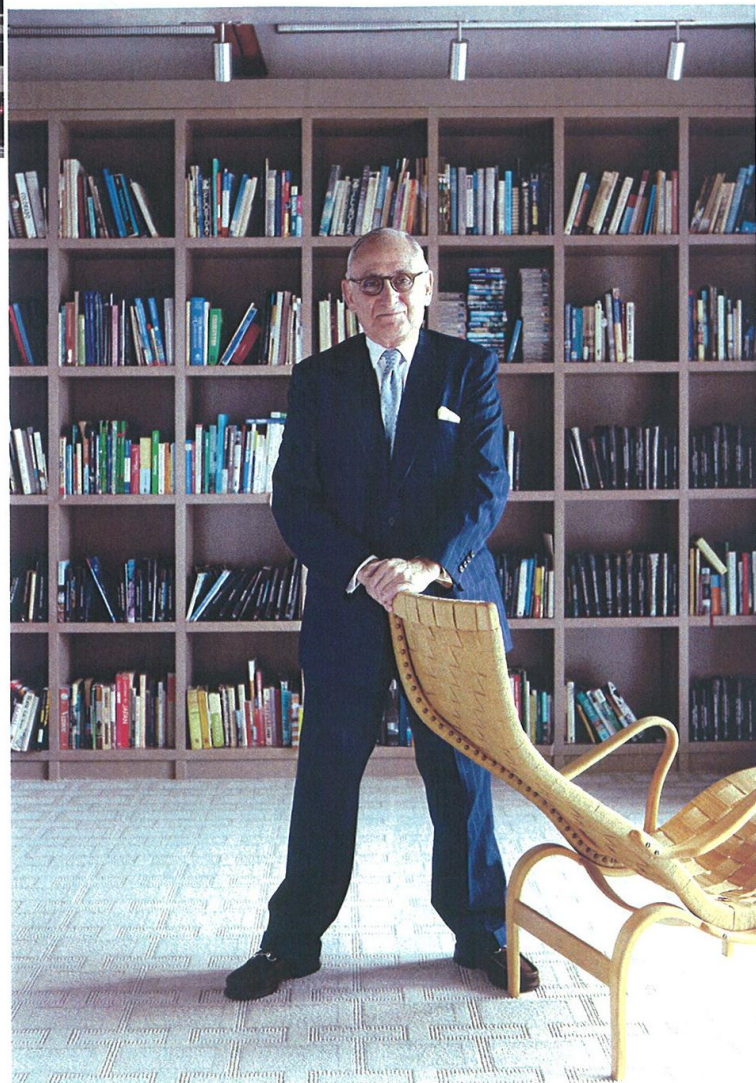


BELOW: Stern in the library of his Manhattan office.
LEFT: Aerial and street views of his 2008 residential building 15 Central Park West. For details see Sources.

ROBERT A.M. STERN, DEAN OF the Yale School of Architecture since 1998, heads a thriving 220-person firm in New York City that has in recent years become well-known for its luxury apartment buildings. Stern remains a thoughtful student of architecture and its history, especially in his home city; here he reflects on what young professionals need to know but don't, and why we should all be paying attention.

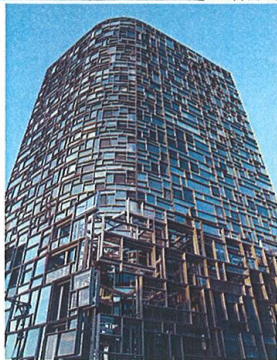
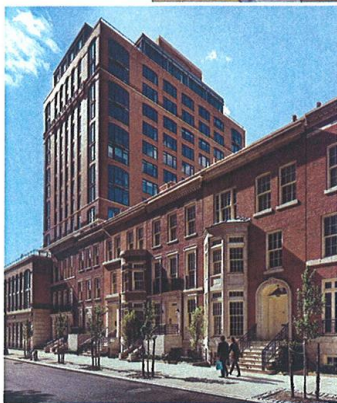
ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST: *At the same time that architects like Frank Gehry and Jean Nouvel are building very unconventional residential towers, you've assembled quite a portfolio of high-end high-rise apartment buildings that feature many classical elements.*

ROBERT A.M. STERN: I've never felt there was one way to do architecture for every condition. You have to decide with clients, or influence clients, on how to approach a project. When the Related Companies asked us to do the building that became the Chatham [2001], they were pioneering new ground from the real-estate side. The mandate was to create a high-end condominium—the first in New York—that would have the aura of a Park Avenue apartment house. Now how do you measure or conform to an aura? Everyone talks about prewar



ROBERT A.M. STERN

AD talks with the Manhattan-based architect about the current state of design education—and its influence on New York's dynamic skyline



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The lobby of Stern's new Los Angeles condo tower, the Century. The eastern façade of Frank Gehry's Manhattan skyscraper, 8 Spruce Street. Jean Nouvel's multiwindowed 100 Eleventh Avenue, in New York's Chelsea neighborhood. Stern's Superior Ink luxury condo complex, in Greenwich Village.

buildings, but they really don't want a lot of their parts: those nasty little maids' rooms, the minuscule bathrooms. Through my experience doing houses at the high end of the market, we were able to create something that was pretty damn convincing. We adopted formal elements from other buildings—buildings I love—and adapted them. You can't just start brand new. Years ago I would go to California and drive around with Frank Gehry. He was as good a student of "dingbat" houses in Los Angeles—those one- and two-family homes with cars parked underneath—as I am of New York City apartment houses. That led him to design his first houses that were interesting.

AD: In the past decade, Manhattan has seen the rise of what some people consider to be outrageous buildings. Are they out of place?

RS: Frank's new apartment building [8 Spruce Street, in downtown Manhattan] is very straightforward, it's just that he has this idea of the façade. Most buildings in New York are façades. One of his four façades is totally flat [the other three feature his signature curves]. I said to him one day, "Frank, you know I love your south elevation." He looked at me very unhappily. It's really very well-done, very restrained, very cool in the best sense of the word. The north elevation is a little forced to my taste. But then it's not about my taste or somebody else's taste. It's perfectly viable and extremely interesting. Now Jean Nouvel's new building [100 Eleventh Avenue]—the façade there is very forced. It's silly, in my opinion. Frank's IAC Building next door is much freer in shape. It's very sculptural, and intriguing in and of itself.

AD: Do you think form has become such a focus in education that key principles are lost?

RS: Form for its own sake, yes. I think in most architecture schools, the planning of buildings—where the front door is, how you move through a sequence of spaces—is being ignored. And the computer has made this even easier. That's why so many recent buildings are so alienating to the user, aside from whether one appreciates what they look like. The great masters of the modern movement, who turned the apple cart upside down in the 1920s—even though it's about time we got over that—were all trained in the traditions of architecture. When Walter Gropius threw history out of the school of architecture at Harvard, it produced some generations of pretty ignorant people.

AD: But while there were still traces of classicism in the work of Le Corbusier or Gropius, there are none in much of contemporary architecture.

RS: Yes, and it shows! There are architects who are 40 and think they can just go off the deep end. If you're an incomparably gifted artist, you can probably pull it off. Take Zaha Hadid. She has no classical training to my knowledge. Her planning is funny and her shapemaking is weird, but she does it with such élan that she pulls it off. Although a city of Zaha would be a frightening place, and I love Zaha!

—INTERVIEW BY JOSEPHINE MINUTILLO