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ARCHITECTURAL STORYTELLING David Rockwell at MiMA, where design fosters a sense of community for its residents.

He Needs His Space

When it comes to design, nobody surprises better than New Yorker David Rockwell. | *By James Heidenry* | *Photography by Marius Bugge* |

“As a creative person, it’s easier to build than maintain.” So says celebrity architect and designer David Rockwell, while sitting in the lobby of a gigantic new building that he helped construct on Manhattan’s West Side. Billed as MiMA—that’s for Middle of Manhattan—by marketing wonks, the high-concept project has three distinct parts: 44,000 square feet of common space, 43 floors of apartments and 13 floors of luxury condos up top.

For Rockwell, a New Yorker who first visited the city when he was 11 years old, the challenge was devising a way to manage, engage and service all of the residents and their varied needs. For inspiration, he only needed

to look around. “New York is about street life,” he says. “It’s about mixing things up and being on the ground.” So because the neighborhood lacks certain conveniences and a distinctive character—MiMA runs along 42nd Street between Dyer and 10th avenues—a host of amenities were brought into the blue glass tower.

The full-size basketball court, Equinox gym, lap pool and massive outdoor sundeck, where summer movie screenings can be held, are among the most glamorous perks in this urban residential experiment. There are plenty of subtler details, such as a business center containing Mac workstations, Fresh Direct vending machines and Starbucks coffee. Unlike many buildings’ common areas, which merely serve as passageways for residents, the enormous space at MiMA was designed to create a sense of community. “Instead of one seating cluster for a group of eight that dominates the whole area,” says Rockwell, “we created a bunch of smaller pockets so you can meet friends there. It enables you to live in Manhattan in a more vibrant way.”

Yotel, the 27-story, futuristic, Japanese-style hotel that is part of the MiMA, counts as a fourth distinct part of the complex and adds hipitude to the microcosm vibe. The pod-like rooms notwithstanding, MiMA residents can count the hotel’s many public spaces, including 11 rentable, private meeting rooms and the see-and-be-seen DohYO restaurant, as part of their prefab ’hood.

The dynamics of the building’s many components and services are a bit hard to grasp at first, but that’s only because Rockwell and his team always strive to invent something new. “The world wants to put creative people in a design box where this person does this or that,” he says. “The core DNA of our firm is that we believe in the power of actually making things from scratch. We have a technology lab in our studio where there is always tinkering—we collaborate. Our spaces tell stories.”

Though Rockwell travels “consistently but not constantly,” many examples of his work can be seen in New York. His team just finished up a nine-year project at the Elinor Bunin Munroe Film Center for the Film Society of Lincoln Center. They also recently completed the Blue School, serving children from age 2 through grade five, which counts the creators of the Blue Man Group among its founders. For Rockwell, being

a father of two was incentive enough to conceive and design the celebrated Imagination Playground in lower Manhattan.

The Rockwell Group now employs 140 people in New York, 15 people in Madrid and one in China. With so many distinctive and diverse designs under his belt—among them the set for the 2009 Academy Awards, the first W Hotel and the JetBlue terminal at LaGuardia Airport—it’s difficult for the designer to identify a favorite. But he certainly knows how to enjoy his own work. “Maybe Nobu,” he says with a smile. “It’s a good place to bring my clients.” ■