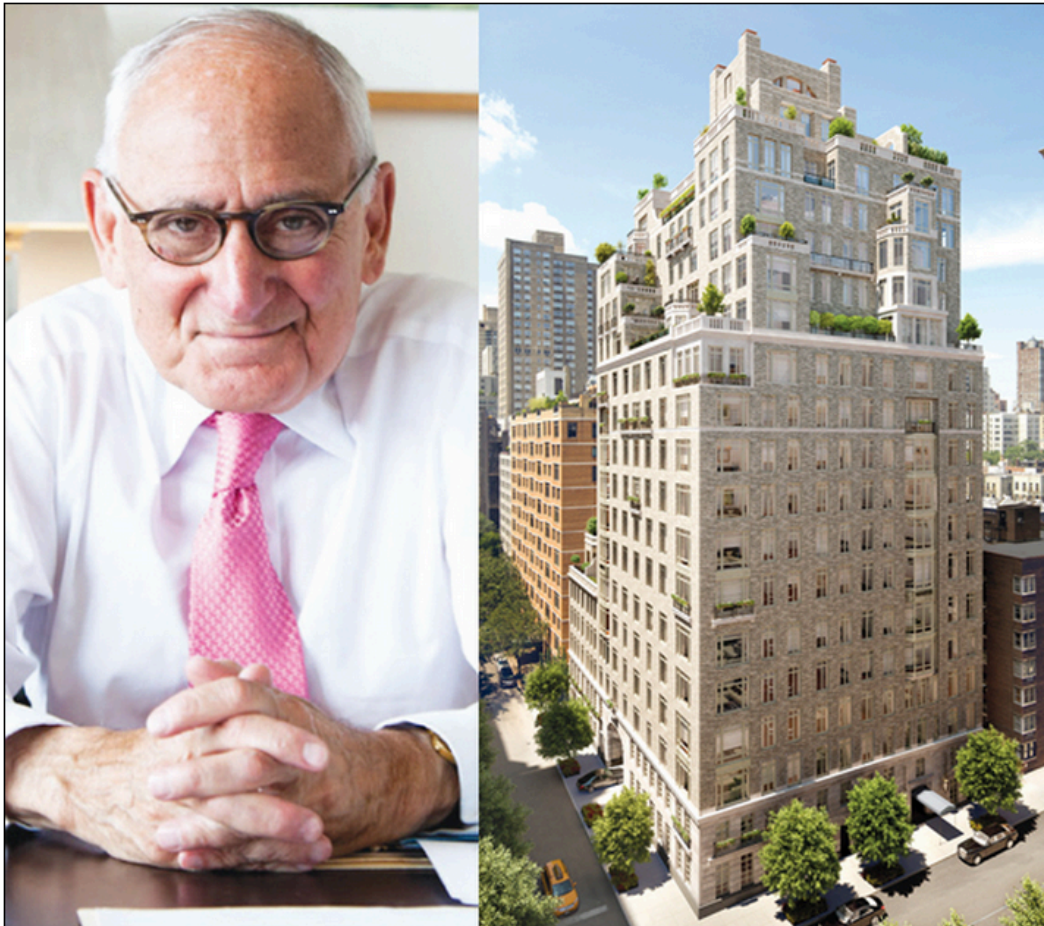


Architecture Review: Robert A.M. Stern creates an instant classic on the Upper East Side

Upcoming residential building on East End Avenue evokes Park Avenue structures of 1920s
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By James Gardner



Robert A.M. Stern and his design for 20 East End Avenue

It has often been observed that there is a quality that distinguishes the architecture of New York City from that of all other cities. The late Frank Williams, who designed 20 buildings in Manhattan from the 1980s into the new millennium, used to call this quality "New Yorkism." He was referring mostly to pre-war buildings, whose style he evoked in his own work. And he was struck by the aggregate of window treatments, facings, massings and canopies at street level, and a thousand other details that made a building fit into the city but that would cause it to seem out of place in Philadelphia or Chicago, and that would cause one of the buildings from either of those cities, if it magically showed up in Manhattan, to seem simply, but decisively, out of place.

As is well known, [Robert A. M. Stern](#) is a master of contextual architecture, and a prodigious designer of buildings in Manhattan, as well as farther afield. He has now designed a new building, 20 East End Avenue, which will soon begin to rise. For followers of Stern's work in the city, it is interesting to see how this new project fits in with the other work he has done in Manhattan; it provides a new perspective on the way in which all of it is subtly attuned to minute variations in its changing urban context.

Yet if New York architecture is different from all other architecture, the architecture of the Upper East Side differs almost as much from that of the Upper West Side. Indeed, there are variations throughout the Upper East Side: the architecture of Fifth Avenue differs from that of Park, for example, and both differ from Second Avenue.

As far as Second Avenue goes, Stern has improved it with one of his best buildings, the Seville, a 2002 work that is decidedly more modernist than one usually expects from Stern and his studio. But a more interesting distinction can be made between the traditionalist works that he designed for the Upper West and East sides, specifically between works like 15 Central Park West and the Harrison on Amsterdam, on the one hand, and 20 East End Avenue, on the other.

To understand this difference, it helps to review very briefly the history of apartment developments in the general vicinity of Central Park. Fifth Avenue was the first to be developed, with a string of private mansions, which were then razed and replaced, starting in the 1920s. By this time, Central Park West had developed an imposing skyline of buildings like the Dakota (1882), the Langham (1907) and the Prasada (1907) all of which were not only more eclectic and historicist in their varied classicism and medievalism than the buildings that would eventually rise on the Upper East Side, but also far more interesting in their volumetric boldness.

Even when a later generation of buildings came along like the Majestic (1930), the San Remo (1930) and the Eldorado (1931), the innovative use of volume remained, and it is reflected in Stern's 15 Central Park West, which opened in 2007.

On Park Avenue, however, when most of what we see today was being built in the 1920s, such bold volumes had largely passed out of fashion, and there were rigorous codes from the city determining height, setbacks and the like.

A similar development occurred on East End Avenue and areas like Sutton Place. Their massing was simpler, and the interest of the building was more a question of surface treatment. Such is the sort of building that the legendary Rosario Candela designed, and such is the sort of structure that Stern invokes at 20 East End Avenue. In fact, there is probably no other building by Stern that comes closer to the spirit of Candela's work.

This new 17-story building, being developed by Corigin Real Estate Group and Florida East Coast Realty, will rise over the rubble of a research building purchased two years ago from the City University of New York for a reported \$61.75 million. The prices for 43 units will range from \$4.5 million for the smallest apartments, at 2,000 square feet, to \$20 million for the penthouses, prices that now sound almost reasonable compared with those commanded by buildings on Central Park South and 57th Street.

As close as 20 East End Avenue appears to classic Candela buildings like 720 and 740 Park Avenue, it is, as Stern explains in a video on the building's website, importantly different in its functions from any of Candela's buildings.

For instance, because even wealthy families no longer tend to have a large, live-in serving staff, the areas formerly occupied by servants' quarters have been transformed into family spaces.

Real estate, Stern explains in the video, is about lifestyle, and so he had conceived parts of the building — whose interiors were also designed by his firm — as a kind of private club. As such, it will have a wine cellar, an alcohol storage locker for each residence, a 3,000-square-foot gym with shower rooms, and a spa and wood-paneled library on the second floor that promises to have a display “curated” by the architect, as well as a billiards room and a dining room for larger gatherings.

As for the exterior of the building, it is largely a boxy structure up to the 12th floor, at which point it begins to fritter away in a complicated series of setbacks like those seen in Candela's 770 Park Avenue. The surface of the building is marked by rusticated limestone cladding at the base, and on the first and second floors, with a two-tone gray brick surface along the rest of the façade. This two-toned gray brick seems to me fundamentally unlovely, the one weakness in the design. Furthermore, although there is the occasional precedent for it, for example at 880 Park Avenue, it doesn't look good there either, and it seems alien to the aesthetic that animates the rest of 20 East End Avenue.

Despite his apparent devotion to Candela, Stern is happy to take liberties, disrupting the window treatments on the East End Avenue side with a sequence of curving bay windows. The transition at the 12th floor from the bulk of the building to the setbacks is attractively announced by a pure white, classical structure that is linked to the upper floors with a group of balustrades. These recur, together with sundry other variants, on the upper floors.

Perhaps the building's most striking element of urban scenography is a massive arched entranceway on 80th Street, which adds an unexpected element of volumetric drama to what is otherwise an affair of planar surfaces. This porte-cochere, whatever its functionality, promises to look wonderful and was doubtless suggested to Stern by buildings like the Dakota and several structures on Sutton Place.

This entrance-way will lead in turn to a splendid lobby in the form of an octagonal rotunda arrayed in Venetian plaster, floors of marble and limestone and a dramatic stairway to the public rooms on the second floor.

Until now, this stretch of East End Avenue has not been, perhaps, the most elegant part of the avenue. One suspects that that is about to change.