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## **Extell Has French Kiss for de Portzamparc**



Extell's Riverside Center is one of two major projects by Christian de Portzamparc, with 3 million square feet of the architect's distinctively shaped buildings. Courtesy Extell

Christian de Portzamparc's name has barely been heard in New York since his LVMH Tower on 57th Street went up in 1999, a harbinger of wave of brand-name architecture that followed, a wave from which the Pritzker Prize winner was conspicuously absent. But while few firms are currently working in New York, Atelier Christian de Portzamparc is poised for a comeback as it gets underway with two of its largest projects to date—and two of the largest anywhere in the city—the Riverside Center and Carnegie 57, both for flourishing diamond-dealer-turned-developer Gary Barnett and his Extell Development Company.



Curved setbacks and alternating columns of glass give Carnegie 57 a cascading aspect.

“They’re very reasonable, they’re not prima donnas,” Barnett said in an interview. “We give them all kinds of challenges to hit and they do. They’re creative and also able to handle the challenges of building in New York and designing in New York and keeping the budget in mind while still coming up with something spectacular.” Both the Riverside Center and Carnegie 57 present considerable challenges. The former occupies the final site at Riverside South, an 8 acre space that was originally designated for a 2 million-square-foot TV studio. Instead, Barnett has proposed a 3-million-square-foot residential complex with six signature crystalline towers by de Portzamparc. The City Planning Commission certified the project on May 24, kicking off the seven-month public review process.

The following day, the announcement of Carnegie 57 made the front page of *The New York Times* touting that

it would become the tallest residential tower in the city at 1,005 feet, [surpassing](#) both Frank Gehry's Beekman Tower (867 feet) and the Trump World Plaza (861 feet). More noteworthy, perhaps, is the fact that the tower, which Barnett hopes will command the highest prices in the city, is coming along at a time when the economy is improving but far from the heights of architectural bombast just a few years ago.

And this was no spec rendering. Foundation work began on Carnegie 57 in April and steel girders should be rising above the sidewalk by the end of the month. Barnett had been trying to make the site—near 7th Avenue, across from Carnegie Hall—larger but he wound up with an offset-L where the 57th Street frontage is 159 feet compared to 78 feet on 58th Street.



Riverside Center (far right) is the last piece of the Riverside South development begun in the early 1990s.

André Terzibachian, a de Portzamparc principal, said the greatest challenge for the designers was determining how to take this unusual lot, along with the strict setbacks mandated by the zoning code, and craft it into an elegant, cohesive tower. The expense of such a tall building, to say nothing of the exacting expectations of Barnett, meant no wasted space or room for architectural flourish. Still, De Portzamparc managed to work some in, curving the setbacks to create a cascading effect, which is further heightened by alternating columns of light and dark glass. “It expresses New York’s vertical energy,” Terzibachian said.

The east and west facades are more like cuts than cascades—in part because the vertical reflections had to be masked in the crook of the L. The designers created what they call a semi-abstracted “Klimt” pattern, which employs a third type of glass to create a surface [reminiscent of](#) an Adele Bloch-Bauer dress. The most difficult part of the design was making it all invisible from the inside. “Our client’s concern is that it had to be as nice as possible, not too aggressive,” Terzibachian said, though this was achieved through a proprietary glass treatment.



Carnegie 57 will be the tallest residential building in the city when it is completed, with commanding views of Central Park. The "Klimt" facade can be seen in the crux of the building. Courtesy New York Observer

Still, even the fanciest foreign architecture cannot please everyone, though there are some who it must. At the Riverside Center certification hearing, City Planning Commission Chair Amanda Burden expressed great concern that Barnett is hueing to Riverside South's previously established 12 percent affordability requirement, as opposed to the 20 percent the Bloomberg administration has essentially mandated for large-scale development projects. "We expect to come to an agreement on that," Burden said.

The local community board, which will vote on the project by the end of July, also maintains the project is too large and cloistered, with 3.2 acres of open space meant more for residents of the complex than their neighbors. Extell did [a fair amount of outreach](#) going in, repeatedly meeting with the community about the project and [even reducing](#) the height of the two western towers by at least a dozen stories each, though their western counterparts each crept up a few floors and all the towers were bulked up to compensate.



A cafe and water feature at the center of Riverside Center. Some community members worry about how public these spaces will be. Courtesy Extell

It is these sorts of negotiations, tradeoffs, and challenges that de Portzamparc finds thrilling. "New York has always been a source of inspiration," Terzibachian said. "His theories about the open block were very much informed by New York and his trips here when he was a student."

The firm has not exactly been idle in the city, with some 10 projects that nearly came to fruition, though none ever crossed the threshold into the public realm. Terzibachian said that de Portzamparc has also kept a tight rein on the firm, selectively choosing his work for maximum creative control and to avoid corporatism. And while this approach may not achieve the most buildings, it keeps the firm's roughly 80 employees busy, even during the downturn. "We have had no layoffs," Terzibachian said. Even the failed projects can lead to work, as one, a jagged condo tower on Park Avenue South, was the catalyst for the firm's introduction to Extell, as the developer of that project recommended the firm. Its first task was a series of feasibility studies for Carnegie 57 in 2006.

Barnett demurs at the suggestion that brand-name architecture is a new approach for his firm, which has worked in the past with the likes of Kostas Kondylis, Lucien Legrange, Cetra/Ruddy, and Cook + Fox. "We seek out the right architect and the right aesthetic for each project," he said. Still, with more high-profile projects underway, such as SOM's Gem Tower in the Diamond District and KPF's World Commerce Centre on the Far West Side, Barnett said he will continue to work with good firms. Such as? "You'll have to wait and see," he said.