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Reasons to Love New York 2011

22. Because the Skyline Is Soaring Again

By Justin Davidson

When Lehman Brothers collapsed, the cranes fell silent. Building went into a state of suspended animation, and New Yorkers had a chance to consider what the boom had wrought. But a living city can't hibernate for long, and New York is waking to the crackle of construction. Developers have used the hiatus to line up deals, finish designs, and gather support from a Bloomberg administration that's eager to help. Already, Christian de Portzamparc's pinstriped shaft at 157 West 57th Street is well on its way to its glittering 90-story height, and plans for exuberant 1,000-foot-plus towers are lined up like jumbos on a runway: at 15 Penn Plaza, on West 53rd Street next to MoMA, on Ninth Avenue in the Thirties. Those three will be taller than the Chrysler Building, going nearly eyeball-to-eyeball with the Empire State.

All through the quiet years, an assortment of megadevelopments kept trudging closer to reality, and seemingly all at once, the hard hats are ready. Willets Point, Queens's pothole-and-chop-shop capital, is finally getting connected to the sewage system, which portends a new \$3 billion neighborhood, complete with convention center and hotel, hard by Citi Field. At Atlantic Yards, attention is turning to the first in a projected series of huge apartment buildings, beginning with the world's tallest modular tower. Coach's recent agreement to move into Hudson Yards will trigger construction on that forest of future offices and also nudge along the final stretch of the High Line. As One World Trade Center approaches its topping-out, Towers 3 and 4 have suddenly sprung into view nearby. Universities are competing to build a multibillion-dollar high-tech campus on Roosevelt Island. Even in the historically drab world of affordable housing, the prospects are lively: Hunters Point South, a 30-acre waterfront site with wide-screen Manhattan views, is being rethought by the hot firm SHoP.

What is most exciting about all this ferment is that Boom 2.0 looks far more promising than its recent predecessors. Before the nineties, New York had a reputation as a town that was deadly to architects: Land cost too much; rules were too rigid and the politics too stifling to allow anything but efficient mediocrity. In the last development orgy, we got a scattering of better buildings, though architecture was often treated as a marketing strategy—a set of flamboyant façades, applied by marquee auteurs. But New Yorkers were jolted into appreciating architectural ambition, and with a little luck, the next growth spurt will merge that sophistication with a new

set of values: affordability, public space, sensitive design. This time, we might just get the additions to the skyline that we covet, desperately need, or even just enjoy arguing about. (“It’s out of scale!” “Out of context!” “Out of this world!”) The best alternative to a good but costly design, after all, is a better, cheaper one. New Yorkers always have been world-class specialists in demanding quality at bargain prices, and this time around, we are in no mood to settle.