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The Rhythm of a City Block

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Rob Bennett for The Wall Street Journal
One57 is set to be the tallest residential building in New York City.

In the last few years, brand-name architects have made their mark on New York in an unusual way: by building apartment buildings.

In generations past, it was far more typical for big architects to design office buildings for pricey corporate clients, while residential developers focused on floor plans and finishes, rather than buildings that make major statements on the skyline.

But residential developers increasingly are hiring star architects to make bolder statements, like the apartment houses on Manhattan's West Side designed by architectural darlings such as Jean Nouvel and Annabelle Selldorf. With prices and rents floating up into the stratosphere, the selling power of these names clearly hasn't been lost on developers.

The most recent example of this phenomenon is developer Gary Barnett's marquee project, a 90-story condo tower called One57 that is rising opposite Carnegie Hall on 57th Street. Set to be the tallest residential building in the city, One57 will surpass in height Frank Gehry's 870-foot twisted tower on Spruce Street, the city's reigning beanpole of a residential tower in the Financial District.

One57 also is going to stand out in another way: selling some of the most expensive units in the city with penthouse price tags at nearly \$100 million. In all, the condos in One57 have a combined price tag of about \$2 billion.

That has posed quite a challenge for the architect Mr. Barnett enlisted, Pritzker-prize winner Christian de Portzamparc. Mr. de Portzamparc, a modernist who has been acclaimed for the sculptural forms of his skyscrapers, needed to walk a fine line on 57th Street with a building that signified wealth and cutting-edge architecture, but was still respectful of the city around it.

In the end, he has succeeded in some ways. Renderings of the project show he has stitched his trademark beauty and elegance, in the form of a shimmering, waterfall-shaped tower.

But the building's main shortcoming is that it tries to draw too much attention to itself on a stretch of Midtown street that is an anachronistic mishmash of design styles. There are Beaux-Arts office buildings, a postmodern skyscraper and a neo-gothic church; in other words, pure New York.

A sculptural tower would work in this setting but, like a spoiled kid, One57 wants to be the center of everything. It focuses heavily on exterior texture, and in doing so creates for itself its own, self-contained rhythm; a smooth, watery groove that, when completed, will override the rhythm of the block.

One57, with its top that curves to a point and vertical lines of glass dividing windows, will resemble a Swiss Army knife at its highest heights, with mullions that look as though they could be folded out and turned upward like steel blades. Farther down the building, its massing spreads out, creating a structure with multiple roof spaces set back from the street.

These Mr. de Portzamparc has smoothed over with layers of glass that, according to renderings of the finished project, will make the building look like a waterfall, with the edge of each setback resembling cascading water shot on a camera with slow film, so the lines are blurred and frozen in time. The effect is precious and still, as though the building were covered in a fine frost or caked with crystals.

But this touch becomes problematic closer to ground level, where, the design calls for long, ribbon-like vertical panels of undulating blue glass. These panels, which speak more loudly than anything else on the front of the building, seem a garish addition to the building's already-loud appearance.

What is otherwise an elegant sculptural structure will take on a kind of whimsical tone at street level that hogs too much of the air on 57th.

Mr. de Portzamparc, who in New York is best known for designing the headquarters building of luxury goods manufacturer LVMH, says he wanted the building to mirror the long vertical lines of light that appear at the end of New York's east-west running streets.

"The light of the sky is driven to the horizontal in the city. This is very unique to New York, and it allows there to be a very tall tower along the street that does not overpower the street," he says.

Mr Portzamparc says he spent time as a student, in the mid-1960s, exploring New York's neighborhoods and examining the street grid, which influenced the One57 design. At street level, he says, the rippling ribbons of glass on the buildings south side reflect the curved corners of the setbacks dozens of floors above.

"Sometimes at street level, you are not conscious of what's happening in the sky. A tower only exists from afar in the city, and on the street, you have street life," Mr. Porzamparc says.