

An Architect Gets Busy

Norman Foster Enjoys a New York Moment

BY C.J. HUGHES | JULY 25, 2014 | NEW YORK TIMES

His buildings might not be the tallest, priciest or zaniest. But in New York, the British architect Norman Foster seems to be having a moment all the same.

Four major creations from the designer, who favors lots of stainless steel and glass, are under construction or close to breaking ground in Manhattan, where the award-winning architect has been relatively quiet since starting his career five decades ago.

And these new buildings — 50 United Nations Plaza, 551 West 21st Street and 610 Lexington Avenue, which are condominiums, and 425 Park Avenue, an office project — come after a few notable setbacks for Mr. Foster, including the New York Public Library's recent decision to rethink its planned conversion of part of its research flagship into a circulating library using a Foster design.

So what's fueling the current Foster fad?

"What's shocking is the reverse question: Why is one of the most prominent architects of his generation so underrepresented in New York?" said William Lie Zeckendorf, the cochairman of Zeckendorf Development, whose 50 United Nations Plaza, an 88-unit condominium, is being developed with Global Holdings.

Mr. Foster noted that his firm has been working in New York City for more than a decade, and that two of the upcoming projects — 610 Lexington and 50 United Nations Plaza — were commissioned before the recession hit and construction was temporarily stopped. The fact that these buildings, along with the Chelsea condo that was commissioned in 2011, "should now be on site at the same time tells much about the healthy state of the New York City economy," Mr. Foster said.

The Zeckendorf building, a highrise with 43 crystalline stories facing the United Nations on First Avenue, is the farthest along of the bunch and will be Mr. Foster's first residential highrise in the United States. Its rounded windows, which give the facade a tubular look, are now being installed, with occupancy expected early next year.

When it does open, sharp-eyed residents should be able to identify the condo as a Foster design, said Mr. Zeckendorf, who added that he allowed the architect as much free rein with the project as possible.

Indeed, 90 percent of the ideas there, from the lack of moldings in the apartments, to the gleaming canopy over the front door and the waterfall wall in the lobby, were from Mr. Foster. (Mr. Zeckendorf opted not to use Mr. Foster's cylindrical metal door handles, however.)

Mr. Zeckendorf, who famously teamed with Robert A. M. Stern Architects for 15 Central Park West, says apartments designed by brand-name architects always command a premium. Average list prices at the \$500 million project are about \$3,300 a square foot, or \$2.21 million for the cheapest one-bedroom, which may be below the \$6,000-a-foot rates that some condos along West 57th Street are charging, though still a hefty total. Mr. Zeckendorf declined to say how many apartments have sold at 50 U.N. Plaza since marketing began last October.

Similar prices are being asked at 551 West 21st Street, a 19-story, 44-unit

condominium at the West Side Highway in West Chelsea, where units are about \$3,000 a square foot, or starting at \$7.25 million for a twobedroom. Contracts have been signed for about half of the building's apartments since March, according to SR Capital, the developer.

Design flourishes will include windows trimmed inside and out with goldcolored metal, living rooms with whiteoak herringbone floors and kitchens with marble counters. Mr. Foster, who designed all the interiors, will also supply door handles.

The concrete-panel facade will give the building a more buttonedup look than some of the other condos planned in the neighborhood, like the curvy 11story building designed by Zaha Hadid for the Related Companies at 520 West 28th Street next to the High Line.

But Mr. Foster's original design for 551 West 21st Street called for something that was much more metallic, said Scott Resnick, SR's principal, adding that he felt the shinier version looked too much like an office building. Anyway, "I think this building is pretty radical," he said on a recent tour of the building, which is expected to be completed by fall 2015.

For Mr. Resnick, who is a member of a real estate dynasty — his father is Burton P. Resnick, the chief executive of Jack Resnick & Sons — enlisting Mr. Foster closed a circle of sorts. In the early 2000s, the architect was hired by Jack Resnick & Sons for 200 Chambers Street, a 258unit condo at the West Side Highway. But Mr. Foster and the Resnicks parted ways after the city refused to allow the building to go higher than 30 stories. Costas Kondylis and Partners finished designing the building and retained few of Mr. Foster's details, Mr. Resnick said, though he added that he and Mr. Foster "stayed friends through the years."

Mr. Foster, 79, who grew up in Manchester, England, and attended graduate school at Yale, founded Foster Associates in 1967. In 1993, it was renamed Foster and Partners to better reflect a more collaborative approach.

This spirit seems evident in Mr. Foster's New York projects; indeed, a promotional video on the website for 551 West 21st Street features not Mr. Foster but a colleague, Brandon Haw, who is no longer with the firm.

Mr. Foster, who was known for much of his career for his office buildings, won the Pritzker Architecture Prize, his profession's highest honor, in 1999. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1990 and given a life peerage in 1999.

Today, the firm, whose bestknown recent building might be London's 590foot 30 St. Mary Axe, called the "Gherkin" building for its picklelike shape, has offices in 20 countries.

In New York, where Mr. Foster opened an office in 2007, the firm's bestknown completed work is probably the Hearst Tower, at Eighth Avenue and West 57th Street, with geometric stainlesssteel and glass walls.

But Mr. Foster has been active in New York City for years. In the early 2000s, he designed a store for Asprey & Garrard, a British luxury goods retailer, which was located at Trump Tower at Fifth Avenue and lined with huge shop windows. But it closed a few years after opening.

Foster and Partners was also one of seven design teams to bid on creating the master plan for the World Trade Center site, a commission that ultimately went to Studio Daniel Libeskind in 2003. Mr. Foster went on to design Tower Two of the World Trade Center site, at 200 Greenwich Street, an 88 story office building whose beveled tip contains

four distinctive diamond shapes, but it seems indefinitely stalled; when announced in 2005, the building was supposed to be finished by 2011. The building's foundation is in place, but Silverstein Properties, the developer, is currently trying to line up a major tenant, which would help secure financing for the project.

Freshest in the public's memory, though, may be the firm's design for the New York Public Library's plan to turn closedoff stacks in its main branch in Midtown into an atriumcentered lending library. In May, the library scrapped the \$300 million project amid concerns about rising costs and after criticism from many quarters, including from academics who disagreed with the removal of books to create the new spaces.

Mr. Foster declined to comment on the library plan. But in May, he said in an interview about the library design, "If I have any kind of sadness on the thing — besides obviously not having the project going ahead and having spent a huge amount of passion on the project with colleagues — it is that the proposals have never been revealed, and there hasn't really been a debate by those involved, including those who would have benefited from an inclusive approach to the library."

A slim, whiteskinned hotel designed by Mr. Foster for 610 Lexington Avenue, at East 53rd Street, was shelved during the recession. But the development team of RFR Holding and China Vanke, China's largest residential developer, has recently resuscitated it as a condo and the foundation is now being poured, using Mr. Foster's original design.

In a world where some architects are strongly identified with a particular style — think Frank Gehry's "crumpledpaper" designs — Mr. Foster may not stand out as easily, said Nancy Packes, a real estate consultant who is not affiliated with any of his projects.

But highlighting his numerous awards and massive global portfolio should help convince home buyers that he is a commodity worth investing in, Ms. Packes said. "Buying apartments today is very much equivalent to buying fashion," she said. "You can't have haute couture without a namebrand designer. The same goes for buildings."

In 2012, Mr. Foster beat out architects like Ms. Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and Richard Rogers in a competition to design 425 Park Avenue, a 47story, 670,000squarefoot office building at East 55th Street. It is expected to break ground next spring, after a building on the site is demolished, and be completed in 2017.

"He's an extraordinarily talented, highenergy individual," said David W. Levinson, the chief executive of the L & L Holding Company, its developer. And he is an avid sketcher, unlike other contemporary architects who do all their designing on computers, Mr. Levinson said. "I am never without a pencil and my sketchbook," Mr. Foster said.

And since the "starchitect" trend isn't expected to abate anytime soon, demand for Mr. Foster's work should only intensify, said Michael Sorkin, an architect and writer. "Architects have become celebrities," he said, "and in America, we thrive on celebrity cachet."

Correction: August 3, 2014

An article last Sunday about the British architect Norman Foster and the four big projects his firm is working on in Manhattan misstated the size of one of them, 425 Park Avenue, an office building that is currently under construction. It is to be 47 stories, not 25. The error was repeated in a picture caption. The article also misstated the significance of his project at 50 United Nations Plaza. It is Mr. Foster's first residential highrise in the United States, not his first ever residential building in the United States.