
FROM OUR ARCHIVE ⓘ

How Architect Robert A. M. Stern Is Reviving Manhattan's Gilded Age

BY ADAM PIORE, PUBLISHED ON 05/03/2018

Ever since the waning days of the Jazz Age, two buildings have dominated the skyline above Central Park's southeastern corner: the Sherry-Netherland and the Pierre, a pair of ornate towers that stand watch at the entrance to the city's Upper East Side. It was to these two elegant forms—and to the less conspicuous prewar buildings around them—that the architect [Robert A. M. Stern](#) looked when he received the commission from developers Arthur W. and William Lie Zeckendorf to design [520 Park Avenue](#), the 54-story, neoclassical skyscraper that has risen between the two sisters in recent months.

With its slender profile, four-spire crown, and limestone cladding, 520 is part of a dialogue across the ages with the grand buildings of New York's last epic luxury construction boom. "If you look at the great apartment houses of the Upper East Side, you find that each of the individual buildings has an elaborate identity," Stern says, sitting in his palatial Park Avenue office. "We've been studying them for years." In person, Stern, who turns 79 in May, is charmingly brisk. His attire, like his architecture, is conservative and impeccably assembled, but if you look long enough you notice whimsical flourishes, such as a pair of bright yellow socks decorated with blue anchors.

If the exterior of 520 pays homage to the past, the interior offers modern, king-of-the-world comforts. Each of the 33 condos encompasses at least one full floor—4,600 square feet—and features stunning views (the lowest apartment starts on the 14th floor). Single units are expected to sell for an average of \$40 million. Five duplexes, each commanding more than \$70 million, reportedly went into contract last June, one

purchased by the appliance mogul James Dyson and another by Frank Fertitta, former owner of the UFC mixed martial arts company.

The lustrous lobby is designed to exude both intimacy and stately grandeur, thanks to the blending of wood, metal, and Sarrancolin marble, a material once favored by French kings. Residents have access to 15,000 square feet of amenities, including a two-floor health club, an intricately landscaped private garden, a screening room, and a wine cellar. The centerpiece of the project is an underground swimming pool room, fringed by hand-carved stone latticework under a high, vaulted ceiling. The cathedral-like space showcases the kind of craftsmanship one rarely sees anymore, because it's either too expensive or too difficult.

"I don't think there's any room like this that has been done in 75 years," Stern says. "It's going to be a knockout."

Construction topped out at 800 feet earlier this year. The building is not set to open officially until the fall, but a visit to the developer's sales office (which has been turned into a replica of one of the apartments), gives a good idea of what it will be like to live at 520 Park.

The elevators open at each level onto a private foyer that leads into a grand entrance gallery "off of which all activity flows," says Stern. Although the finishes include everything you might expect from a luxury condo—oak parquet floors, Covelano Oro marble countertops, appliances by Miele, Sub-Zero, and Wolf—the layout has a distinctly prewar feel. Even the views are a throwback to the unobstructed sight lines of the very first skyscrapers. To its north, the building looks over a landmarked neighborhood prohibited from rising higher than 210 feet. And to the west, starting on the 21st floor, are breathtaking vistas of Central Park.

"This is a very historic New York location," says Arthur Zeckendorf, who is himself from a historic New York real estate family. Arthur and William's grandfather William "Big Bill" Zeckendorf Sr. was one of his era's most flamboyant builders, developing transformative projects, including Kips Bay Plaza on Manhattan's East Side, L.A.'s Century City, and downtown Denver's Mile High Center. Their father, Bill Zeckendorf Jr., helped revitalize [New York's Upper West Side](#) and Union Square in the 1980s with buildings such as the Columbia on 96th Street and Zeckendorf Towers at One Irving

Place—projects that both Arthur and Will cut their teeth on when they were still learning the game.

The intent for 520, Arthur says, was to “create one of the greatest apartment houses that has ever been built.” Those are marching orders Stern has been preparing for his entire career. When he was a student at the Yale School of Architecture, in the early ’60s, Stern found himself far more inspired by the magnificent Gothic Revival structures across campus than by the glass-and-steel aesthetic espoused by his professors.

“The modernist argument of flattening everything out, of just running ribbon windows across façades, seemed to be very thin compared to the richness that I could see out the window,” Stern says. In the years that followed, Stern increasingly found himself incorporating elements from the past into his commissions. Stern is perhaps best known for the heft and elegance of buildings he has designed for college campuses across the country—including every Ivy League school except Cornell—and the private homes he has built around the world.

Eventually, both as the dean of the Yale School of Architecture and in his own work, Stern would emerge as one of the foremost exponents of what he calls “modern traditional architecture.” “The traditional languages of architecture can be reinterpreted in a modern way for modern times,” Stern says.

It’s an approach not everybody embraces—his critics have at times derided his style as old-fashioned, even boring. But Stern maintains that while he wants his buildings to be noticed, they must stand the test of time. “‘Wow’ is nice,” he once said, “but then you have fifty years where the building still has to make a good impression.”

Not that Stern and his team at Robert A. M. Stern Architects can’t be playful or forward-looking. The front entrance to the Walt Disney Feature Animation Building in Burbank, California, completed in 1994, is crowned with an enormous conical purple hat modeled on the one worn by Mickey Mouse in the movie *Fantasia*. The sleek, 58-story obelisk in Philadelphia now known as the Comcast Center, built in 2008, was hailed by one critic as a “shining example of sustainability and high-tech design that respects Philadelphia’s dense downtown history.”

Stern's collaboration with the Zeckendorfs began in 2004, when he participated in a design contest the developers held for an apartment building at 15 Central Park West. Stern submitted plans for a prewar-style building that promised to match the grandeur of the past, and won. The building, completed in 2008, broke sales records from the get-go. Hedge fund billionaire Daniel Loeb paid \$45 million for the penthouse—helping to catalyze a real estate boom in which luxury-apartment sales prices have grown by 60 percent since 2009, more than 25 percent faster than the rest of the market. A subsequent flurry of speculation contributed to the rise of a cluster of tall, spindly Midtown condos with astronomical asking prices.

While several of those glass-and-steel structures have been criticized as ostentatious, 15 Central Park West, more in tune with its neighborhood, has been seamlessly woven into the fabric of the city. What's more, few of the new towers have managed to replicate the success of Stern's building, which last year continued to command the highest condo resale values in the city.

“Our investment thesis on 15 Central Park West was that if you build the finest apartment house on one of the three great avenues—which are Central Park West, Fifth Avenue, or Park Avenue—you will be able to achieve extremely high prices,” says Arthur. The brothers are applying the same logic to 520 Park. Stern, for his part, is simply doing what he has always done, albeit on a slightly grander stage. Most apartments built in the post–World War II era, he says, failed to address the “residential character and needs that people would like in a house,” such as family rooms, generous closet space, high ceilings, and a gracious entrance. “We reintroduced that at 15,” Stern says. “We have it now at 520, even maybe in some ways more refined. You get better as you go.”



About

Newsletter

Terms of Use

[Privacy Policy](#)

[AdChoices](#)

Follow Us  

Departures is a lifestyle resource for U.S. issued American Express Platinum Card® and Centurion® Members. While Departures is owned by American Express, the content is independently written by third party writers and creators. © 2021 American Express Company