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Nouvel's \$150 Million Window Waterfall Shakes Up Condo Design

By James S. Russell

April 16 (Bloomberg) -- The mottled surface of 100 11th Ave. will shimmer like a towering alligator handbag or sparkle as if sheathed in sequins. Paris celebrity architect Jean Nouvel has just upped the ante on Manhattan condo design.

The crinkly glass that clads the \$150 million, 23-story condo tower for locally based Cape Advisors Inc. blows away the pink-brick drabness that's been strangling New York apartment architecture for decades. Contractors are digging foundations for the project, where penthouse asking prices range to \$22 million. Move-in is slated to begin in December 2008.

Nouvel, 61, curves the building from south to west to take advantage of Hudson River views from its site at the western edge of the Chelsea gallery district (it's next door to Frank Gehry's new IAC building). The surface is faced in densely nested rectangles of windows, from 2 feet tall to as wide as 16 feet. All are slightly tilted or angled, and some are tinted in subtle shades of gray. To enrich the kaleidoscopic effect, Ateliers Jean Nouvel has even prescribed window shades in tones that range from beige to brown.

Nouvel has mastered optical sensuality in such projects as the Agbar Tower in Barcelona, whose brightly colored surface appears to be filmed in water -- apt for the water-utility client.

The architect built his reputation on a limousine-sleek minimalism in deeply saturated midnight colors. (See Andre Balazs's 40 Mercer St. condos, almost near completion -- a design from Nouvel's blue phase.) His recent work has moved in an exuberant, willfully peculiar direction: the striking Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis and the controversial Quai Branly museum of non-Western art in Paris, which critics have decried as condescending and bombastic.

Hot Designs

The new idiosyncrasy has made Nouvel a hotter property. He's just gotten the plum commission to design a 2,400-seat concert hall, the Philharmonie de Paris.

He gets away with it by taking his designs to the edge of perversity, then showing you how sensible he's actually been.

On the lower seven floors of his Chelsea building, Nouvel will erect a second wall 15 feet outside the tower wall, lining the street with the same angled and tilting glass. He makes energizing use of a zoning mandate that requires thicker lower floors, leaving most of the space between the two walls open so that the light-refracting effect deepens -- augmented by reflections of passing traffic.

Inside, little terraces and semi-enclosed rooms form bridges across the space. Here and there he perches a tree in a planter. The lower wall becomes part fun-house mirror, part greenhouse, part shadow-dappled atrium.

Surprise Pool

He continues the theme inside the sleek lobby, which he contrasts with a wild-looking back garden mounded up against the sooty brick of the fortresslike halfway house that lies to the north. A 70-foot swimming pool pokes out unexpectedly from below.

The parts don't add up, but Nouvel doesn't try for unity. His bravura gestures transform the cramped and noisy street level -- what most developers would just write off -- and revel in distinctively French artificiality.

The single-minded focus on floor-to-ceiling glass results in units with many wedge-shaped rooms. The broad living spaces, opening to clinically elegant, stainless-steel trophy kitchens, will show off art collections and designer furniture. Cozy they're not, especially the bowling alley-scaled penthouses.

Nouvel's current sensibility pulls you in, once you digest the oddness. There's something satisfying about imaginatively completing what Nouvel only implies.

(James S. Russell is Bloomberg's U.S. architecture critic. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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