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Real Estate

BIG DEAL

The New 'Old-Money' Upper East Side



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

BESPOKE Philip House on East 88th Street is being converted to condos with a prewar sensibility.

By [ALEXEI BARRIONUEVO](#)

IN the TV series “Gossip Girl,” the Brooklyn-bred character Dan Humphrey is the self-described Lonely Boy, who, realizing he can never fit into the wealthy world of the Upper East Side of [New York City](#), starts his “Gossip Girl” Web site, devoted to the “scandalous lives” of the privileged set.



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

135 East 79th Street is being built with prewar touches.

“Membership in this community was so elite you couldn’t even buy your way in,” Mr. Humphrey lamented in the series finale last month.

On the old-money Upper East Side of Astors, Rockefellers and Roosevelts, residents are now signaling that they too would like to keep things pretty much as they are, in terms of real estate. Developers have found that the look of glassy condo buildings that have popped up in Midtown and downtown is not welcome in the neighborhood.

A clutch of recent conversions and new developments seek to fit in rather than stand out.

In condo conversions like Philip House at 141 East 88th Street, developers are riffing on the prewar character of buildings made famous by architects like Emery Roth. New buildings at 135 East 79th Street and at 200 East 79th Street use limestone facades and traditional elements, like the street-level window grilles at 135 East 79th Street that the architect William Sofield says were made by the manufacturer of the gates at Buckingham Palace.

“A lot of people who live in the area really respect someone that comes in and designs a building that makes them feel at home and not that their neighborhood is being changed,” said Jonathan Wilf, a project manager with Skyline Developers, which is building the 20-story 200 East 79th, at the corner of Third Avenue.

In mid-2011, when construction signs went up around the site, nervous residents began calling Skyline, Mr. Wilf said. “ ‘Is this going to be one of those glass buildings that seem to

be all the rage?’ ” he recalled their asking. “We are glad that we were not totally off-base wanting to build a more classic building.”



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

New buildings on East 79th Street include No. 200.

In recent years developers have been able to erect some glassy residential buildings, like the Lucida at 151 East 85th Street, which the Extell Development Company completed in 2009. But lately other proposed projects, even some with famous architects attached, have ended up in the cross hairs of Upper East Side residents bent on preserving the character of their residential buildings.

When the developer Aby Rosen tried to build a Norman Foster-designed 30-story elliptical glass tower at 980 Madison Avenue, he [battered heads with the author](#) Tom Wolfe, an Upper East Sider, who attempted a “Gossip Girl”-style takedown.

Mr. Wolfe testified at a public hearing in 2008 that: “980 Madison is in the heart of the Upper East Side historic district and it does not need this additional structure. I think it is incumbent upon the developers to ask Mr. Foster to roam through the great archives of architectural history, or architectural future, and come up with something that has more meaning with the Upper East Side.”



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Apartments in the glass tower at 1055 Park Avenue closed for up to 40 percent less than asking prices.

A year later the Landmarks Preservation Commission approved a [modified plan](#) for a smaller tower to be built there, above the Parke-Bernet Galleries building. An official from Mr. Rosen's company, RFR, said Thursday that the company had no construction plans at the site for the moment.

Such battles are headaches for developers. But their decision to go for classic over modern on the Upper East Side is most likely also motivated by not-so-inspiring sales at some glassy condo towers in the area. Apartments at 949 Park Avenue sold for discounts of up to 27 percent below asking prices, and at 1055 Park Avenue, residences closed for 30 percent to 40 percent below asking, according to [Streeteasy.com](#).



Richard Perry/The New York Times

A condo conversion is under way at 530 Park Avenue.

Pricing has held up so far at the more traditionally designed new condo developments and conversions, and sales have been brisk. All but one of 39 apartments offered for sale at 200 East 79th Street is under contract, Mr. Wilf said. The building began selling in October. Skyline is asking \$8.1 million for the remaining residence, a four-bedroom with 3,021 square feet.

The architect John Cetra designed the building, which will have modern touches like a gymnasium with a basketball hoop and a mirrored dance area, but also more traditional looks, including a lobby featuring tropical Sapele wood walls accented by bronze mirrors.

Since it began selling in early December, close to half of the 30 apartments at 135 East 79th Street have gone under contract, at an average price of over \$3,400 per square foot, said James Lansill, a senior managing director of Corcoran Sunshine. The developer, the Brodsky Organization, is amending its offering plan to include an almost 9,000-square-foot

penthouse with about 430 square feet of outdoor space that will be offered for \$50 million, he said.

Mr. Sofield, a modernist who has worked for the fashion designer Tom Ford, resisted pressure from marketers to bathe the building's facade in limestone, which my colleague Christopher Gray quipped may now be the "blue blood" of architecture. Instead, the facade is a blend of limestone and hand-laid pale gray brick.

"This building is very different from anything I have designed, in that I am really quite the modernist, and this is my first foray into the antique," Mr. Sofield says on a video on the building's Web site.

The buyers are different as well. Unlike One57, the glassy edifice in Midtown where several global billionaires have bought apartments, 135 East 79th Street describes fewer than 25 percent of its buyers as foreigners, and only two residences as having been bought as pieds-à-terre, Mr. Lansill said.

For most buyers, the apartments will be primary residences. And that is in keeping with the character of the area, whose residents are looking to integrate into Upper East Side society and send their kids to some of the best private schools in [Manhattan](#). There, they hope, they will feel like insiders, rather than "Lonely Boy" outsiders.