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## PETER PENNOYER'S NEO-CLASSICAL HIGH RISE WILL BOOST NEIGHBORHOOD

*STATELY 16-FLOOR CONDO PROJECT ON LEXINGTON HAS ROOTS THAT HARKEN BACK TO SIR CHRISTOPHER WREN*

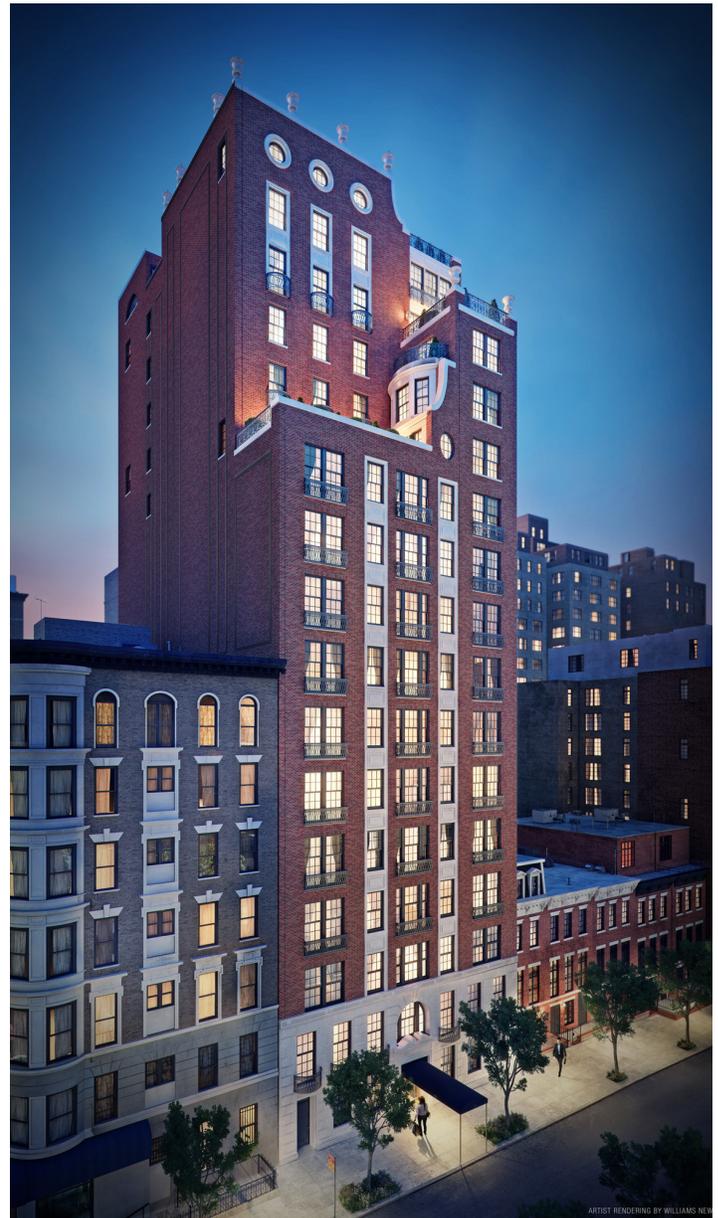
By JAMES GARDNER

In its demure and quiet way, a new development at 151 East 78th Street looks to be one of the more promising projects in the city, even though its actual construction has not yet begun.

I stress its virtues because I fear that, since it falls squarely within the classical vernacular style associated with Robert Stern, it will not get the respect it deserves. That is because it does not aspire to be boldly original, but rather simply competent and attractive in an idiom that no longer enjoys the blessings of the academy.

Also significant is the fact that 151 East 78th Street, developed by Spruce Capital Partners, is among the few high-rises in New York, and perhaps anywhere else, designed by Peter Pennoyer, one of the leaders of the next generation of the neoclassical style. Pennoyer is better known for his work on townhouses and interiors, as well as for his sumptuous and scholarly volumes on early 20th-century American classical architects like Delano & Aldrich, Warren & Wetmore, and Grosvenor Atterbury. If these long dead architects, who did so much to adorn the city, have any living heirs, Pennoyer is surely one of them.

Just two doors east of one of the more clamorous stretches of Lexington Avenue, the 16-story 151 East 78th Street promises to fit in with its neighbors as well as could be hoped, given that these include two seven-story buildings just west, and a line of three-story townhouses on the other side. When completed, 151 East 78th Street will contain 14 full-floor condominiums in its 16 stories, two of them duplexes. Each unit



will offer between three and six bedrooms and occupy between 3,000 and 7,000 square feet.

The new building will rise over, or near, a part of Lexington that could surely use its help. Lexington is, after all, one of the lumpier and most uneven avenues in the city. Notwithstanding unflattering influence of the subway at 77th Street and Lexington, the tall and highly visible building at 151 East 78th should greatly enhance the entire neighborhood.

The aesthetics of the building owe a great deal to Sir Christopher Wren's designs for Hampton Court, with a tasteful use of red brick enlivened by limestone accents, as well as by three round windows, or oculi, at the summit of the building. The same British monument was the inspiration for Robert Stern's Chatham, at Third Avenue and 65th Street.

Like many buildings conceived in the neoclassical style, 151 East 78th Street aspires to look like a century-old Park Avenue building. The Park Avenue prewar building, as opposed to the older and more idiosyncratic structures on Fifth Avenue and Central Park West, tends to present a somewhat flatter façade, with less ostentatious ornament and with less boldness in the manipulation of volumes. And that aesthetic is certainly borne out in Pennoyer's latest project.

What will perhaps be most striking about the building is the use of limestone accents, which will be especially evident at street level. In that portion of the building, 151 East 78th Street presents itself as a sustained expanse of rusticated limestone, rising two stories. Its punched windows are arranged in the classic six-over-six pattern, adorned with small balconies at the second and 15th floors.

Especially Park Avenue–esque is the building's central entrance way, with its sober-looking canopy protruding from a façade that manages, within the space of 10 feet, to include a broken pediment, a mulioned window and a voluted keystone that leads to the predominantly brick passages beginning at the third floor.

In the building's central portion, which rises from the third to the 11th floor, the oversize windows are paired at the ends and surrounded by brick, followed by single windows framed in limestone, and then, in the center, an interesting sequence of tripartite windows.

Starting at the 12th floor, the building's summit becomes more interesting in terms of its volumes. Most

of it continues on as a setback that rises over a terrace for an additional five stories, before culminating in three delightful oculus windows. To the east, a three-story pavilion emerges, with a curving, complicated bay that recalls the Georgian or Federalist style that inspired some of Pennoyer's townhouse designs. At the very top, according to the renderings, a series of pale classical urns will adorn the roof, an adornment rarely used in New York City, even in classicizing prewar buildings.

I have one complaint with the building, though it has nothing to do with Pennoyer. On both sides of the structure, a sheer and nearly windowless brick wall serves to create a vast surface area which Pennoyer has had the thankless task of adorning with lime-stone trceries. This is all in the hope of softening the municipally mandated ugliness that is necessarily entailed by such an uninterrupted expanse of brick, a fire-code consideration that prohibits windows directly above the roofs of contiguous buildings.

The use of the pale limestone over the dark red brick creates a striking visual pattern, and it is probably the best that the architect could have done in the circumstances. But it is unfortunate that Pennoyer, and so many other designers of high-rises around the city, should be straight-jacketed by such structures, which pretty much condemn their projects to imperfection. No matter how elegant Pennoyer's façade, there is, through no fault of his, a built-in inadequacy on at least two of the building's four sides.

In an age when it could be expected that a row of roughly commensurate high-rises would flank the building, such strictures were less offensive. But it is unlikely today that any such thing will happen on either side of 151 East 78th Street. And so, for the next 100 years, or however long the new building remains standing, New Yorkers will have to endure a rather unsightly sidewall.

Here, once again, is an example of the city interfering, for no very clear or good reason, with the interests of architecture and urbanism, to say nothing of the developers.

This complaint in no way detracts from my appreciation of Pennoyer's design, which will considerably enhance a corner of the Upper East Side that could surely use it.