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A Slice of the Sky The supertall 111 West 57th is what the ruling class builds for itself.

By Justin Davidson
Impressions: 408,622



It's an uncomfortable thing to fall in love with a building you wish didn't exist. Of all the supertall towers that have risen like flares, lighting up the city's excesses and inequities, 111 West 57th Street, designed by [SHoP Architects](#) and erected by JDS Development, is by far the most thoughtful. As a statement, it's infuriating; as architecture, it earns its place on the skyline.

There's nothing new about that contradiction, of course. The mighty and the rich have been dotting the globe with splendors since power and wealth were invented, and the masses have beheld those [self-homages](#) with a mixture of resentment, gratitude, and rage. New York is a global principality overlaid on a democratic metropolis, and if the lords of capital are going to alight

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here, their supertall palaces might as well inspire some awe. Mostly, they don't. Christian de Portzamparc's One57 is repulsive. Gordon Gill and Adrian Smith's Central Park Tower expresses the primacy of engineering over elegance. The cool symmetries of Rafael Viñoly's 432 Park Avenue charm some but rouse amateur critics to fury. (Also, the elevators break down.) It doesn't matter: These ventures' only audience is a tiny club of potential buyers who experience them from the inside out. SHoP's 111, however, works hard to seduce us all and to be a good New Yorker. Or as the firm's founding partner Gregg Pasquarelli puts it, "If you're going to put up a building that 8 million people can see all the time, it had better be pretty fucking good."

The object in question is nearly 24 times taller than it is wide, making it by far the world's slender supertall. That meant that it could be sutured to the landmark Steinway Building without swallowing it. (The narrow glass box that faces 57th Street as a retail entrance exists only because the zoning rules say it must.) The thinness also applies to its shadow, which moves along from any given spot in Central Park in a matter of minutes. A small square of land supports 60 apartments, 14 of them in the base, the rest stacked like casino chips in the tower. If you spread those households out over a dozen acres, we wouldn't call it grotesque inequality; we'd call it a suburb. But in the heart of the city, the sky is a precious and limited resource.

A century ago, the law that created the New York setback gave large buildings the presence of three-dimensional sculptures instead of just so many segments of street-facing façade. But 111 is unusual in that the most flattering sides are its flanks, not its front. What holds the thing together is a massive concrete H, solid toward the east and west and open to the north and south. Seen from the park, it's a glass straw banded in brass. Look up from a few blocks along 57th Street, though, and it turns into a feathered quill, rippling with shadows and tapering to a sharpened point. The design's achievement lies in how it achieves that taper, those shadows, and the swordlike combination of delicacy and strength.



The saber's hilt is the 1920s Beaux-Arts beauty by Warren & Wetmore that was once the home of Steinway, where the likes of Vladimir Horowitz and Sergei Rachmaninoff test-drove pianos. So much of the classical-music world has faded from this neighborhood: the managers, flacks, and hopefuls; the Patelson Music House, where you could browse the sale bin of symphonic scores and keep one eye on Carnegie Hall's stage door; the studios above the hall, where Bernstein, Brando, and Agnes de Mille once lived along with generations of strugglers. If you heard Russian on 57th Street back then, it was being spoken by a violist, not an oligarch.

SHoP has literally plunged columns through the Steinway Building, leaving the landmarked rotunda room untouched, freshening up the exterior limestone, and renewing the copper roof. The pianos are silent, but the shell looks better than when the place was alive with arpeggios. Time ticks on; the whole point of music is to mark off its progress. Yet this kind of project virtually demands that architects engage with the past. The upper part of the old building is a brick patchwork of off-whites; the architects ordered six shades of cream for the tower's façade. Terra-cotta and bronze embellish the obligatory glass, evoking both the Woolworth and Seagram buildings in counterpoint. Those waves along the sides are set in motion by more than two dozen terra-cotta forms, each a play of convexities and concavities that might have been pried from the cornice of a Baroque church. As your eye is cast upward, the sequence of those shapes creates the illusion of movement, an effect that will be sharpened once the exterior lighting is turned on. Like most fine ornamentation, these forms serve a purpose: They scatter the wind in much the same way a 19th-century auditorium's plasterwork diffuses sound to give an

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orchestra that warm, complex sonic glow. The pilasters fall away one by one near the top, creating miniature setbacks in a graceful curve.



In her 1995 book, *Form Follows Finance*, the historian Carol Willis argues that despite the metaphors and cultural significance that attach to tall structures, a skyscraper is above all the expression of the ability to pay for it and the promise that it will make money. Until recently, only large companies and corporate developers could raise the capital or command the requisite cash flow. Then the global plutocrat class decided that stowing large fortunes in airborne real estate was a good investment. Like the art market, it was a self-fulfilling bet. When the rich buy something, that's what makes it valuable. A small number of sales, rather than high-volume rental, became the surer way to meet the costs of shooting toward the sky. Except that a \$10,000 square foot of floor space is functionally indistinguishable from the \$2,000 version, and nice bathtubs can bump up the price only so much. The sole way to justify those hyper-super-ultra-deluxe premiums is by supplying a scarce and irreproducible resource: an aerial view of Central Park and all the cute little behemoths down below.

So, yes, the panoramas from the topmost apartments are Olympian. The eye lifts toward the horizon far beyond the Rockaways then drops to the canyon floor. Shakespeare in the Park looks like a flea circus. (If you can't afford to own that vista, might I suggest a visit to one of New York's several observation decks? Even a \$75 ticket to the Empire State Building's renovated 102nd floor seems modest compared to nearly a million times as much.) In pursuit of an experience not even a billionaire can buy, I climbed up inside the steel latticework that adds 170 feet of empty

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space to the height — basically a crow's nest made of ladders and platforms, open to the breeze. I can already imagine the first action-movie finale to get filmed here with the loser fluttering into the void. Some will seethe at the spire as an icon of arrogance, pointlessly pointing to the heavens. I prefer to think of it as the gesture that completes the line.

There's another option for a location scout in search of dangerous architecture: the tuned mass damper. This is an 800-ton block of steel plates near the top, suspended from cables and plates in a chamber of its own. When the wind pushes one way, the counterweight swings the other, keeping floors and stemware still. A couple of decades ago, trying to achieve that effect in such a reedy building would have been a gamble that might have resulted in dancing chandeliers and a tempest in a toilet bowl. Today, increasingly sophisticated computer modeling can predict how structures will interact with weather. (On the other hand, technology didn't prevent 432 Park Avenue from whining like a haunted mansion.)

SHoP's 111 has been in the works for years, of course, and if you think it may be a sumptuous relic in a post-pandemic age of modesty, the tea leaves suggest otherwise. Soon, a skyscraper so scrawny you can practically see around it will be framed by the next generation of fat colossi coming to the neighborhood around Grand Central. One Vanderbilt is already there, patting the Chrysler Building on the head like a kid brother. SOM's 175 Park is on the way. KPF's 343 Madison isn't far behind. And they will not be the last. No tower will be the last, biggest, or tallest for long, but this one might be the best.

