

SPRING 2019

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Home + Design



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SIMON UPTON/THE INTERIOR ARCHIVE

Inside the Tudor Revival manor on Richmond Plantation near Charleston, South Carolina (page 126).

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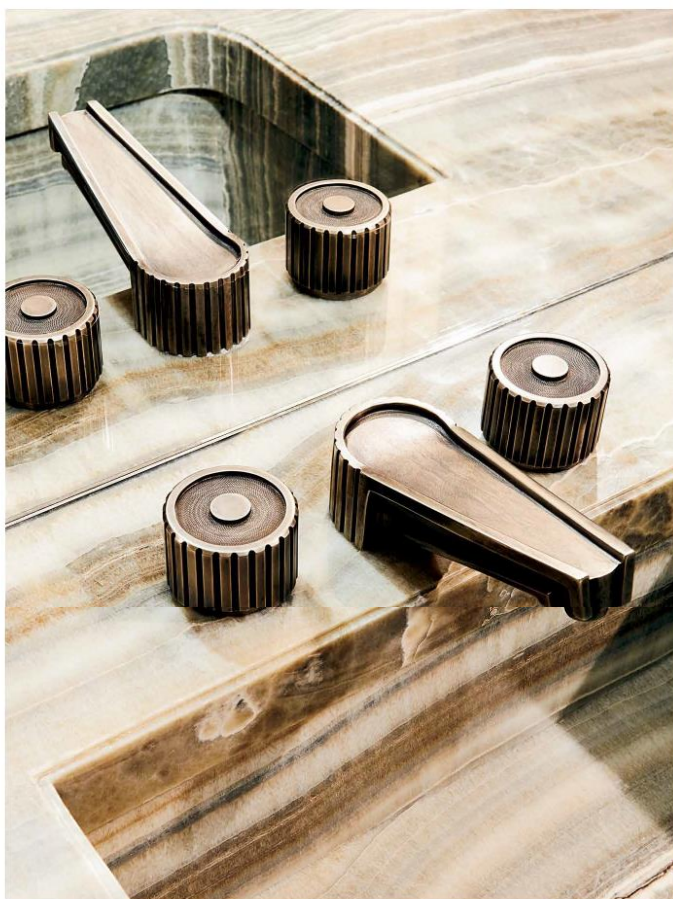
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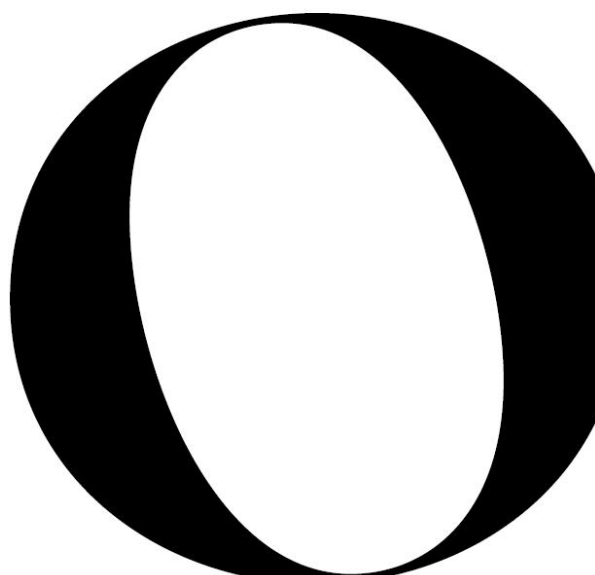
MANHATTAN RHAPSODY

With his ornate interiors for 111 West 57th Street, the supertall residential tower built on top of the iconic Steinway Building, William Sofield pays homage to New York's prewar Golden Age.

BY CHRIS POMORSKI PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAOLA + MURRAY



The blackened-steel fittings for 111 West 57th Street were cast by P.E. Guerin. *Opposite:* William Sofield in one of the project's staged apartments. *For details, see page 142.*



ON A RECENT MORNING, the designer and architect William Sofield arrived at the loft building in downtown Manhattan where he has long kept a studio wearing light jeans, a gray blazer, and a white oxford unbuttoned at the neck. At 58, Sofield is tall and broad-shouldered, with animated blue eyes and a crown of gray hair. One might reasonably mistake him for a retired NFL quarterback. Sofield, who is widely considered one of the most influential interior designers of his generation, cannot remember a time when he did not want to be an architect. In the suburban New Jersey home where he grew up, his older sister recently discovered detailed floor plans that he had drawn as a child: one for a bulbous,

futuristic space-age compound and the other for a Tudor Revival home. His most recent residential project, at 111 West 57th Street, is considerably more ambitious. Set dead center along the southern edge of Central Park, the condo comprises the land-marked, 10-story Steinway Building and an adjacent 1,428-foot tower designed by SHoP Architects. Currently nearing completion, the tower will be the thinnest skyscraper in the world.

The commission posed no shortage of challenges for the designer, but thankfully, said Sofield, “most creativity is born out of constraint.” The building’s location and height will make it a very public private building—a draw for judging eyes—and its history, too, has many potential claimants. The Steinway Building, completed in 1925 for the piano company Steinway & Sons, was designed by Warren & Wetmore, the architects behind Grand Central Station. Rachmaninoff played there. So did Billy Joel. The condo itself will be vast yet intimate, its tower containing just 46 residences, ranging in size from 3,900 to 7,128 square feet. With units going from \$18 million to \$57 million, these apartments will house some of the world’s wealthiest citizens. Sofield relishes such pressures. For him, 111 West 57th represents a once-in-a-career opportunity to stage a comprehensive, grand-scale vision of life in New York’s contemporary Gilded Age—a chance to create something legendary.

“First of all,” Sofield said, “you want to know you’re in New York.” Gregg Pasquarelli, a partner at SHoP and 111 West 57th’s principal architect, shares this view, and he and Sofield drew on many of the same sources for inspiration: the Woolworth Building, Rockefeller Center, One Wall Street, the Chrysler Building. Pasquarelli has spoken of the responsibility that the site confers—his sense that the building should serve the city at large, as well as its residents. “What was very important was designing a building that was composed of the DNA of New York City,” he told me. “A building that couldn’t be on the skyline of Hong Kong or Singapore or London.” Robed in wave-patterned terra-cotta and sinuous ladders of bronze, 111 West 57th rises to a series of tapering setbacks that call to mind Rosario Candela’s buildings from the 1920s and ’30s. It might be read as a rebuke to the glass-spire anonymity of other supertall towers that have appeared in Midtown: 432 Park Avenue, One57, Central Park Tower.

Tasked with the interiors, Sofield designed appropriately extravagant motifs to match the façade. On display for now in lush renderings and a spare-no-expense Fifth Avenue sales gallery, they add up to a kind of Art Deco rhapsody, using cutting-edge technology to achieve a modern fantasy of the Jazz Age. “You don’t want to give me free rein, as a rule,” Sofield said, allowing himself a mischievous grin. “But I was not given any parameters.”

Sofield is best known for his commercial work: boutiques for Gucci, Bottega Veneta, Yves Saint Laurent; David Barton’s disco-steampunk gyms. But the owners and developers of some of the



A rendering of New York’s 111 West 57th, which towers over Central Park and has a move-in date of early 2020.

country’s most rarefied residential properties have increasingly called on his talents. His interiors are amalgams of the modern and the historic—careful contrasts of proportion and texture, practicality and whimsy. Great architecture and design, he said, must evoke “a series of emotional experiences.”

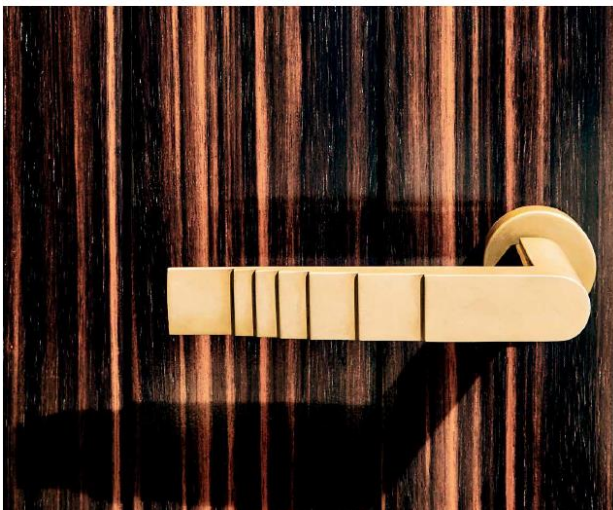
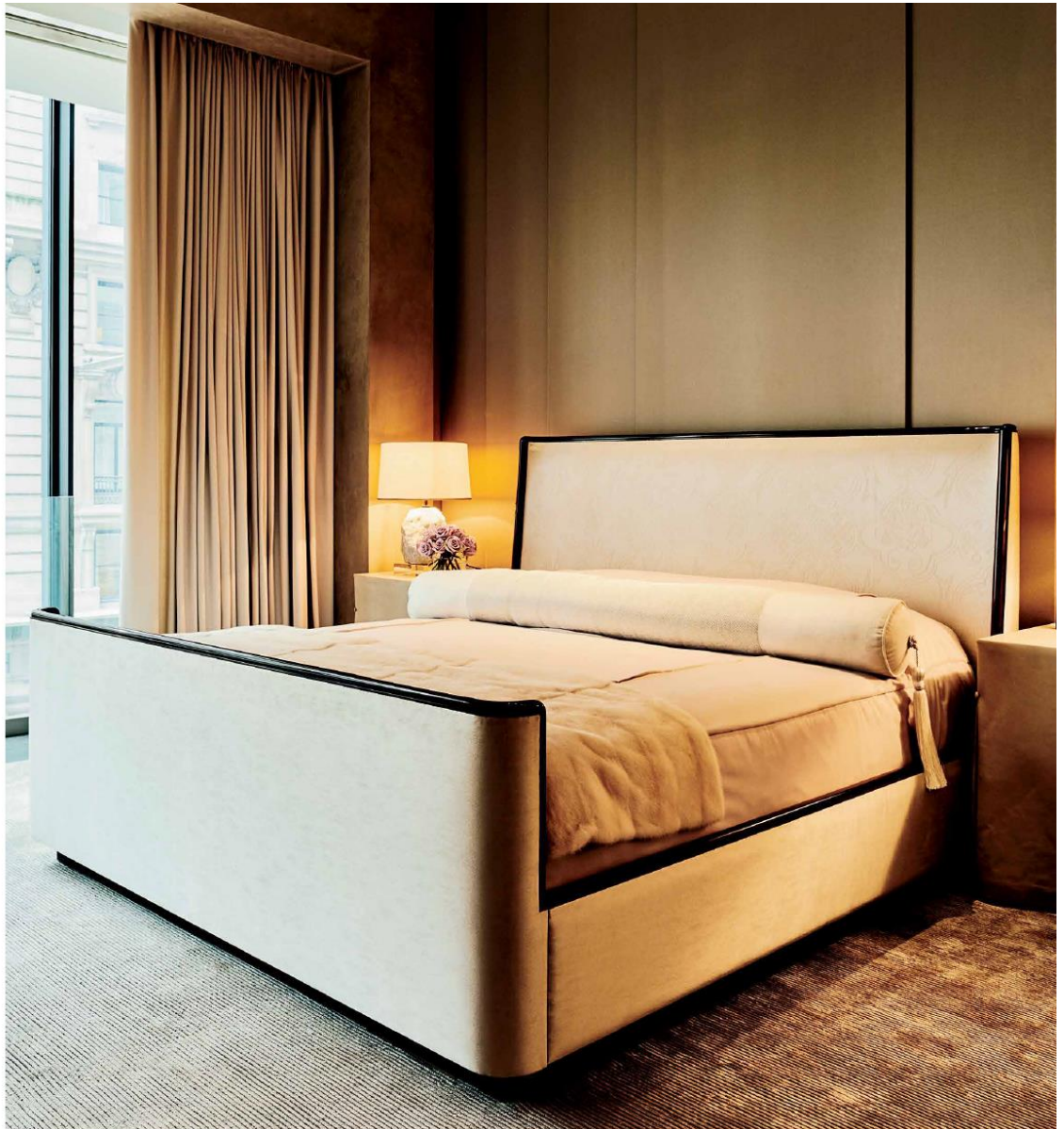
The dominant emotion conjured by 111 West 57th residences is perhaps serenity. Ceilings in simplex apartments rise as high as 14 feet; 27 feet for duplexes. Floors are solid oak, and many rooms have walls of glass looking onto the park. Entrance galleries feature Brazilian quartzite. In select residences, wet bars clad in Turkish marble that would delight Scott and Zelda lurk off the living room.

Downstairs, in the Steinway Building, a massive Beaux Arts rotunda remains, as it must, having been landmarked in 2013. Formerly the piano showroom for Steinway & Sons, it will provide an entryway for residents, complete with original marble and frescoes. Owners coming home to 111 West 57th will also enjoy the privacy of a porte cochère. “It wasn’t in my original concept,” Sofield said. He decided to add one only after observing the shameless pursuit through downtown Manhattan of even minor celebrities by smartphone-wielding fans.

The Steinway Building’s opening, in 1925, coincided with an artistic flourishing on West 57th Street. Sculpted into its limestone façade is a depiction of the Greek god Apollo and the muse of music, alongside portraits of classical composer-pianists. Sofield picks up the narrative baton. The artworks framing the main entrance—*The Escape of the Trees* and *The Breakout of the Elephants*—pay tribute, he says, to the sources of ebony and ivory that gave their lives for Steinway pianos. The elevator, Sofield said, will include “a riff on *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*,” a sculpture by Bernini. A lounge, off the opulent indoor pool, channels Bemelmans Bar, at the Carlyle. Much of the Steinway & Sons showroom’s original wood flooring, marked with grooves left by piano wheels, will be preserved in the lobby, which is accented with marble.

COURTESY HAYES DAVIDSON

Right: The master bedroom in this apartment features a custom rosewood bed upholstered in Cowtan & Tout and a marble lamp by Alexander Lamont. The wool-and-silk rug is from Carini Lang and the curtains were made using Holly Hunt. *Below:* Sofield designed the bronze door handles to mimic the building's shape.



Some of the elements Sofield most treasures are subtler inducements to contemplation. Upon close inspection, for example, a Greek wave motif in the lobby reveals itself to be composed of lily of the valley. Look closer still to find that the lilies are made of blown crystal. Sofield takes joy in such nested visual riddles. Several are scattered like hidden matzo through the building. "Often, if something seems completely digestible, people will look at it, think they've gotten it, and move on," Sofield said. Better to give them something to think about, while they're waiting for an elevator, a car, a drink. The sort of people who are likely to be attracted to 111 West 57th, Sofield said, are all but sure to share his taste—which is to say they're apt to enjoy a challenge. 