

HOMES

Brownstones adjacent to the Whitney Museum are being turned into condos suitable for framing

Developer Daniel Straus tackles the art of the deal by transforming office spaces into deluxe new residences

By MATT CHABAN



The Whitney Museum has created a new work of art — but it's got nothing to do with unearthing a lost Jackson Pollock.

Still, plenty of excavating is going on.

Real estate investor and first-time developer Daniel E. Straus is transforming six dumpy brownstones next door and a turn-of-the-last-century mansion into some of the most luxurious apartments on the already-luxe Upper East Side.

“We wanted to create something special, something unique, something grand, and I really don't think you'll find anything like we've done on the Upper East Side,” says Straus.

They will command prices to rival the Rauschenbergs and Warhols next door, with the 10 condos at Madison and 74th St. starting at \$15 million. A five-bedroom triplex penthouse is

asking \$32 million. Some off-market units could eventually command \$40 million or more.

Three and a half years ago, Straus purchased the homes from the Whitney for \$95 million. The museum had bought the properties over the years, with plans to eventually expand south, but preservationists and locals always stymied the efforts. The Whitney gave up and put the townhouses on the market when it decided to move downtown to its new building beside the High Line.

Straus was an unlikely buyer, having no track record building in the city. But he has plenty of experience with other ailing projects, so to speak.

In 1984, he and his brother took over their dad's five nursing

homes in North Jersey. They turned them into one of the largest assisted-living empires in the Northeast — leading to a \$1 billion sale in 1997.

Straus started investing some of that money in Manhattan real estate, and now he's building it, too.

"I'm always looking for the next challenge," Straus says. "This was such a unique proposition, I fell in love with it."

Straus and his design team hit on a novel concept for the project. Rather than sprucing up the homes and putting them back on the market, the developers are demolishing everything but the facades of the five 1870s brownstones and the Attenbury Mansion around the corner on 74th St.

At this point, nothing is left except those facades. Next, they will essentially construct a 10-unit condo behind the 150-year-old face.

"It's old, but it's totally new," Straus says. "We keep the historic character so important to the Upper East Side, but behind it are unparalleled modern apartments."

That means expansive living quarters unhampered by the existing structure, allowing for large living quarters and top-of-the-line mechanicals, like a four-pipe heating and cooling system.

"It's the best of both worlds," adds Katherine Gauthier of Douglas Elliman Development Marketing, which is handling sales for 33 E. 74th.

It also means state-of-the-art shops on one of Manhattan's most-sought retail corridors, while the Met moves its popular contemporary collections into the Whitney space.

The only other people with access to this high-traffic clientele are hot dog vendors and sidewalk artists.

Like a good work of art, 33 E. 74th was controversial from the beginning.

It started with the Whitney, which tried to expand in 1985, but architect Michael Graves' plan failed. Two more proposals followed, one by Rem Koolhaas in the 1990s and another a decade later by Renzo Piano.

Each time the preservationists and neighbors defeated the schemes at the Landmarks Preservation Commission, which has oversight of the properties because they are in the Upper East Side Historic District.

Straus took over and initially proposed a nine-story version. Locals fought back — and the city requested changes, too, pushing for something shorter and more withdrawn from the street that would not block views of the Whitney.

Straus' team also determined that two buildings along the row should be demolished, provoking more local protest, but Landmarks ruled the buildings nonessential.

In the end, Straus' project was unanimously approved. Locals have come to terms with it.

"It's certainly better than any of the previous iterations, and it's nice to have people living in what are residential buildings again," said Tara Kelly, executive director of the Friends of the Upper East Side.

It's not as if Straus could have easily turned the brownstones back into single-family homes, anyway. The Whitney had subdivided the spaces time and again to suit its needs for offices and back-of-the-house facilities. "It was like a hamster's nest," Elliman's Karen Mansour says of the interiors.

Stressing his commitment to preserving as much of the property as possible, Straus hired Beyer Blinder Belle, whose projects



have include such landmarks as the Empire State Building, Ellis Island and the U.S. Capitol.

"What we're doing, it's not cheap and it's not easy, but it'll be worth it in the end," says Richard Metsky, a partner at Beyer Blinder Belle. It means what you see on the outside isn't what you get on the inside.

Six condos will be housed inside the brownstones. There are two units per floor, with each stretching the length of three brownstones, creating 3,900-square-foot three-bedroom homes.

Above that is a setback with a full-floor, 5,400-square-foot penthouse and a smaller terraced duplex above that. The setbacks help mask the addition, a crucial point for the Landmarks Commission, while also providing privacy for residents. The lower penthouse has a terrace stretching 100 feet along Madison and 92 feet on 74th St.

On 74th St., the Attenbury Mansion is basically being transformed back into a regal manse. Built in 1901 by banker Julian Wainwright Robbins and his wife, Sarah, a niece of Cornelius Vanderbilt, the red-brick beauty is becoming a four-story, 10,000-square-foot maisonette with a private entrance and a 6,300-foot triplex penthouse.

"Every room in every apartment is remarkable," Mansour says. "We've got the grand spaces of a prewar without any of the structural constraints, and 21st-century amenities."

In addition to Beyer Blinder Belle, Straus hired Champalimaud, the Interior Design Hall of Fame design firm famous for its work on five-star hotels, including the Pierre, the Carlyle, the new lobby of the Waldorf and London's Dorchester.

By creating the new building from scratch, the designers had a blank canvas to make the apartments of their dreams. Every unit is entered through ebony double doors, with travertine flooring in the long galleries. There is a big emphasis on the passageways between each room. "It creates breathing room," Gauthier says.

Every space features custom molding and 10-foot stepped ceilings, which only adds to the modern-meets-prewar look.

"On the outside, this looks like grand mansions, but when you step inside, it's like a five-star suite," Gauthier says.

Inside or out, it's a museum-worthy masterpiece.