

Bricks Return With Style in New High-End Buildings

Tired, perhaps, of the familiar glass buildings around New York City, developers are getting creative with custom-designed brickwork.

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Masonry is having a moment. Perhaps it's a symptom of glass tower fatigue, perhaps it can be attributed to a desire for a building material that has warmth and texture. Or maybe it's the hard pull of nostalgia.

Around the city, in TriBeCa, Chelsea, Brooklyn and Queens, on the Lower East Side, the Upper East Side and elsewhere, new developments are sporting brick facades, often with custom-crafted bricks, in some instances with those couture bricks arranged in eye-catching patterns.

It used to be that brick, generally red, was the material of choice for affordable housing, said Howard L. Zimmerman, head of the architecture and engineering firm that bears his name. "Now," Mr. Zimmerman said, "architects at high-end projects are reinterpreting brick in terms of its style and size and in the design of the facade."

The Grand Mulberry in Little Italy, a seven-story 20-unit condominium at 185 Grand Street, designed by Morris Adjmi Architects and scheduled for completion early next year, is clad in specially-made red-orange bricks. The overlay of hand-molded dome-shaped bricks is arranged in a pattern that could have emerged from a dot-matrix printer.

It's a tip of the hat to the Italianate aspects on the facades of surrounding tenements. "There are elements of the brick we used that are reminiscent of the brickwork of the building across the street and other buildings in the neighborhood," said Brittany Macomber, a senior project manager at Morris Adjmi.

Another Adjmi-designed condo, 45 East Seventh Street, which is in a historic district, also has a masonry facade, in this case buff-colored brick, a palette choice that the Landmarks Preservation Commission, noted in its certificate of approval, "harmonizes with masonry materials and finishes of buildings" in the area. There's a single corbel at the base of the seven-story structure, a double corbel at the top and a pattern resembling a checkerboard at its midsection.



The studios are all sold out at the Rowan, a 46-unit gray brick condominium in Astoria. The prices for available apartments range from \$789,000 to \$2.549 million for a three-bedroom duplex. RARE Photography

Oversize gray bricks pave the Rowan, a six-floor 46-unit condominium in Queens. Meanwhile, red bricks from the vaunted Danish manufacturer Petersen Tegl (each brick bears the thumb prints of its maker) line the facade at 100 Franklin Street, a 10-unit condo in TriBeCa that was finished last year. Petersen Tegl also furnished the gray bricks for 180 East 88th Street, a 50-story condominium that opened in 2019.

Other bricked projects: 66 Clinton Street, a 12-unit, seven-story condominium with gray brickwork that is set to open next year; 40 East End, a 28-unit condominium with gray and charcoal brick patterning that opened in 2019; and Chelsea's Park House, a 10-unit condo of deep-red brick that was designed by Annabelle Selldorf and is near completion.



Park House, which was designed by Annabelle Selldorf, has 10 units with prices beginning at \$2.5 million for a one-bedroom going up to \$10 million for the three-bedroom penthouse. Michael Young

Brick, long viewed as a symbol of homeyness, has gone in and out of vogue, according to Andrew S. Dolkart, a professor of historic preservation at Columbia University. “The heyday of brick use was the 1880s. Bricks fell a bit out of favor in the early 20th century,” Mr. Dolkart said. But then, in the ’50s and ’60s, “white brick became popular.”

“I’ve seen a return to the use of clay-based masonry in the past few years,” he continued. “I think there’s a reaction to the homogeneity of those apartments that have gone up in Long Island City: glass, glass, glass.”

In fact, glass is typically the least economical facade material and brick the most cost-effective, said Joe McMillan, the chairman and chief executive of DDG, the real estate investment firm behind 180 East 88th Street and 100 Franklin Street. “But that’s if you use standard-issue bricks,” he continued. “Once installed, the bricks we used were three to four times more expensive than off-the-rack bricks because they were custom-made.”



Handmade bricks are part of the facade at 180 East 88th Street, where prices range from \$1.475 million for a studio to \$16.75 million for a four-bedroom unit. Will Femia

Context is a big driver. For the more astute architects and developers, the goal is not to slavishly mimic the historic architecture of the surrounding buildings, but rather to be part of the fabric of the neighborhood.

“You want to be respectful. You use materials that have been used in the area, but maybe you have some innovation,” said Leonard Steinberg, a broker at the real estate firm Compass, which is handling the marketing for Park House. For example, the base of the buildings has the style of brick that is likely to be seen on classic townhouses, but look a few floors higher and the brick is glazed.

Similarly, there were lots of other masonry buildings near the site of the Rowan, “and the developer wanted something that spoke to the surrounding area but that was also transformative,” said Wayne Norbeck, a partner in the architecture firm DXA studio, which designed the building. Thus, the horizontal and vertical patterning of the brickwork.

But for Mr. Norbeck and others, there’s more at work here than the good neighbor policy. “I think there’s a connection to humanity with brick,” he said. “It’s an old material, and it’s the size it is so that a single mason is able to put it in place.”

Mr. McMillan put it more simply: “We wanted to give a nod to the old-time bricklayer.”

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