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Building 'Suburban' Luxury in the Sky

By ANNA BAHNEY

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IN the last few years, Manhattanites of means have grown accustomed to having the world's most famous architects furiously catering to their every whim, trying to lure them to apartments that seem to break price records with each new building.

The newest entrant is Peter Marino, best known for exquisite interiors created for fashion designers like Giorgio Armani (an apartment in Milan) and Valentino Garavani (a private yacht) and for financiers like Stephen Schwarzman (an apartment at 740 Park Avenue) and David Martinez (one home in London and another atop the Time Warner Center) as well as high-end fashion showrooms evocative of the clothes inside.

Now, in his first building, Mr. Marino, 55, is designing the interiors and exteriors of a new condominium at 170 East End Avenue, between 87th and 88th Streets. The offering plan has not been approved yet, but proposed prices range from \$1,600 to \$3,000 a square foot -- that's at least \$3.2 million for a 1,600-square-foot two-bedroom apartment.

To attract buyers, the building will have to up the ante and Mr. Marino's name will undoubtedly help. Star designers and architects like Richard Meier, Charles Gwathmey, David Childs, Costas Kondylis, Cesar Pelli and Philippe Starck have each had their hand in signature buildings in Manhattan recently.

But even the developer of the East End Avenue condos, Orin Wilf, does not seem entirely sure how to present the project to wealthy urban dwellers.

In a meeting recently at Mr. Marino's 58th Street office, Mr. Wilf, 31, who is from a New Jersey real estate family, suggested a "five star" theme. Louise M. Sunshine, whose firm is managing the marketing of his building, put the kibosh on that: Time Warner Center's trademarked catch phrase was "Five Star Living," she reminded him. Besides, any apartment with a hotel attached to it will always win any contest for providing more service. Not worth fighting that battle.

It is natural to appeal to the aesthetic of a buyer, but the "apartment as art" idea may have run its course, too. Richard Meier's glass tower at 165 Charles Street has the tag line of "Living in Art." Charles Gwathmey's building at Astor Place, shaped like an Alvar Aalto vase, is dubbed "Sculpture for Living."

Mr. Marino, gingerly handling a small white model of his building on the table, said it is, "unique," this way of living, with a park and private schools nearby, underground parking, and large apartments.

But the promotional approach of the "apartment as new way of living" has been attempted, too. The developer Ian Schrager even calls his 50 Gramercy Park North, designed by John Pawson "revolutionary." In a video presented on the Downtown by Philippe Starck Web site, an ebullient Mr.

Starck suggests that in his building, "suddenly we shall arrive in the new cave of Ali Baba, a new island of happiness, a new island of humanity." All that because of a squash court and bowling alley?

The idea of 170 East End Avenue seems more about family than service, quality of life than state of the art, and more familiar than revolutionary. More like the suburbs.

"Like Greenwich on the Upper East Side," Ms. Sunshine said in a way that was almost a question.

Already that part of Manhattan feels removed, closer to Fairfield County than the West Village. On a recent weekday, sunlight sifted through the trees in Carl Schurz Park surrounding Gracie Mansion as girls in jumpers left the Chapin School and tugged on their guardians' arms for a treat from an ice-cream truck. In an open grassy area, a caravan of Bugaboo Frog baby strollers corralled a dozen preschoolers and their toddling siblings as their mothers chatted.

There is compelling reason to pick a superlative and run with it. A notable \$650 a square foot, or about \$165 million, was paid for the building's site, where the Beth Israel Medical Center's Singer Division building stood, plus \$20 million for two nearby apartment buildings that are going to be refurbished and rented. With 110 apartments in 170 East End Avenue (one to five bedrooms), including two maisonettes, to be sold, everyone involved with the project hopes the prices will surpass the \$4,582 a square foot recently paid for the penthouse in Richard Meier's 165 Charles Street building.

Mr. Marino has designed a building with two limestone and glass towers connected by a glass sheath of floor-through and see-through apartments. The building, with the understated moniker 170 East End Avenue, will be home to Mr. Wilf and his family when it is completed in the fall of 2006.

Mr. Wilf, whose company is called Skyline Developers, said that when he went to the 14th floor of the hospital in the spring of 2004, surveyed the park at his feet and the water views beyond, he told the agent, "I will guarantee you I will buy this property."

Six months later his company bought the Rockefeller town houses at 13-15 West 54th Street, opposite the Museum of Modern Art, for \$41 million. He is refurbishing them as his company's New York offices (his personal office is the room where Nelson A. Rockefeller died of a heart attack in 1979).

His company is the New York subsidiary of Garden Homes Development, a family company based in Short Hills, N.J., with large national holdings in residential rentals and shopping centers. Mr. Wilf, in his bespoke suits and jocklike gait from collegiate days playing baseball, and Mr. Marino, who cultivates a sort of bad boy of the Upper East Side persona with leather pants and muscle T-shirts, seem an odd pair. But each found in the other a complementary enthusiasm for a first condo project in New York.

Mr. Marino said he had been repeatedly asked by developers to do an apartment building.

"For 27 years I said no," Mr. Marino said. He wanted to do the whole package -- the structure, the layouts, the interiors -- while many developers wanted him to scale back his involvement, he explained, because of the cost. "I had people just want to use my name," he said, "and I wouldn't have to touch a thing."

But how do you make something wow-inducing when a celebrity architect isn't enough? Each building has its own quirks -- or rather -- perks. The St. Regis, at 55th Street and Fifth Avenue, has butlers. The Lumière, at 53rd Street and Eighth Avenue, has refrigerators for grocery deliveries. Downtown by Philippe Starck has a bowling alley. And 505 Greenwich has a pet spa.

Mr. Marino's answer is to make residents feel like homeowners in a gated community, not deed holders in a high-rise tower.

The building, Mr. Wilf said, will have a children's recreation zone that includes a toddler paint room, a computer area for preschoolers, and miniature golf, video games and billiards for older children. There's even a squash court and interactive driving ranges for mom and dad.

And one more thing: sculptures of sheep.

"It is a play on the rural and urban," Mr. Marino said somewhat impishly.

How suburban is that?

Correction: June 26, 2005, Sunday Because of an editing error, an article on June 5 about a new condominium at 170 East End Avenue in Manhattan referred incorrectly to the previous work of the architect, Peter Marino. This is his first condominium building, not his first building. His commercial projects have included the Whittle Communications headquarters in Knoxville and the Louis Vuitton store in Beverly Hills.