

DEPARTURES

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On the Rise

*As 56 Leonard, the first tower in New York by architects Herzog & de Meuron, nears completion, **Ian Volner** analyzes this ultimate symbol of excess, the likes of which may never be seen again.*

Graphic designer Robert Wong and his family have been living in downtown Manhattan for six years now. But they've recently decided to move up—technically, further downtown, but to a much bigger space, in a much bigger building.

Due to be fully completed in 2016, with the first residents moving in this winter, 56 Leonard is the latest project from famed Swiss architecture firm Herzog & de Meuron. Its singular features include a swimming pool with an outdoor terrace, sweeping views that are unique for the area thanks to a grandfathered-in zoning clause against height, and custom floor-to-ceiling

fireplaces in the penthouses, also grandfathered in and likely to be the last of their kind downtown. All this has drawn a number of other downtowners, who constitute some 80 percent of the building's soon-to-be occupants. Even in Tribeca, the new address stands out. Says Wong, "No other luxury building has Herzog & de Meuron."

For the Pritzker Prize-winning designers, the process of creating this tower has been, to say the least, an enlightening one. On a slightly overcast day in June, Pierre de Meuron and developer Izak Senbahar were in the sales office of the 60-story tower that marks the designers' first foray into New York's booming residential high-rise market. Also present was Ascan Mergenthaler, senior partner at Herzog & de Meuron and the point man for what has been, incredibly, almost a decade-long saga to realize the project.

The journey of 56 Leonard from conception to construction is an object lesson in the pleasures and perils of building big in New York. "I can give you the long story, if you want," says Senbahar, with a weary laugh: As the founder and president of real estate giant Alexico Group since 1988, Senbahar is no stranger to the vagaries of the Gotham development world, but his most recent undertaking is in a class of its own. "I've never been in a war," he begins, "but this ..." He then launches into the vexed history of the site at the corner of Church and Leonard streets—how he traveled to Switzerland in 2005 to meet his would-be architects; how more than a year passed before they were able to secure the necessary permits; how the design was formulated and refined, and construction began to move forward; and then, amid great fanfare and high hopes, how they first opened the sales office. "It was September 15th, 2008," he recalls. "The day Lehman went under."

As the world economy entered a terrifying free fall, sales dried up completely, and the 56 Leonard team decided to halt work on the project. For four years, it remained stalled. Slowly, as the recovery took hold, Senbahar and company began to look around again for new financing, and in 2013 they felt confident enough to resume sales and construction. The results proved a welcome surprise. "That was the happy ending," says a beaming Senbahar: In nine months the tower cleared \$1 billion in sales, including a penthouse deal for \$47 million.

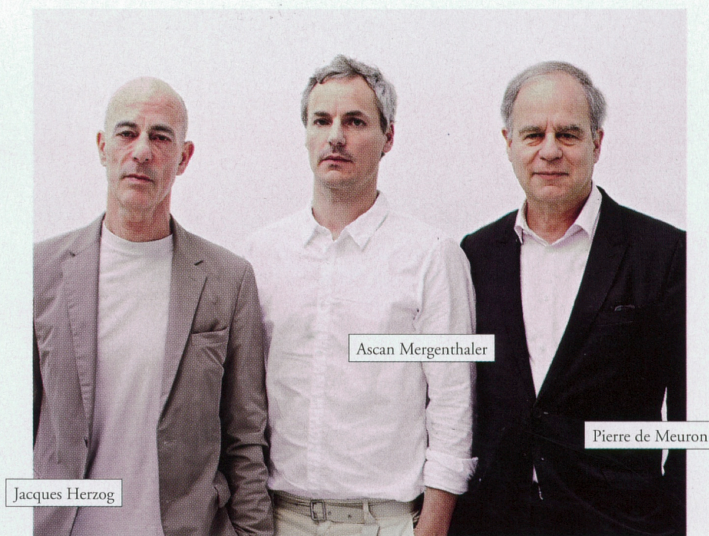
Since then, construction has continued apace, with the building awaiting the rest of its glass cladding and a custom sculpture by Anish Kapoor, a squished chrome blob that will be tucked under one corner of the first-floor plate. Of 56 Leonard's 145 units, only two remain unpurchased as of press time.

From start to finish, the Herzog & de Meuron architects have had to play it by ear, learning the ropes as they went. For one thing, says Pierre de Meuron, "Switzerland is flat." Mountainous as the nearby Alps may be, his hometown of Basel has a distinct lack of skyscrapers.

If the architectural typology was unfamiliar, so were the economics behind it: De Meuron and partner Jacques Herzog have built their reputation on institutional projects, and their most recognizable buildings (London's Tate Modern, Beijing's "Bird's Nest" National Stadium) have been the product of forces very different from those of the rough-and-tumble Manhattan real estate market. In the boom years of this century's first decade, the firm found itself entertaining numerous offers to create a residential tower in New York; but only Senbahar afforded it the latitude it felt it needed to stake its claim on this new and unfamiliar terrain. "It was important for us to understand how we can make a difference," says Mergenthaler, and the designers had to go back to the basics to put their own unique spin on the logic of the New York skyscraper.

That logic was firmly established more than a century ago, just eight blocks away, when architect Cass Gilbert built his landmark Woolworth Building. As Gilbert put it, the skyscraper is "a machine that makes the land pay," its vertical mass allowing it to squeeze rentable space out of the precious urban ground below. But the Woolworth and, for that matter, most skyscrapers have tended to mask the economic cogs of that machine, hiding the living or working spaces behind a cladding of decorative stonework or smooth glass. At 56 Leonard, says Mergenthaler, "we tried to express them." The layout of the building's apartments are fully visible in the jagged outline of the tower. "We could tell you the reason for every wall, every setback, every cantilever," says de Meuron. From the extruded floor plates that provide outdoor terrace space to the projecting glass boxes holding the living rooms, every element of the building's strikingly irregular exterior reflects its luxurious inner workings.

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Yet 56 Leonard manages to turn the Gilbertian formula on its head, almost literally. “Think of the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building,” Mergenthaler says. “The tops are always important.” The crowns of New York’s famous skyscrapers are typically decorative affairs that taper to a point. But by Gilbert’s logic, the top of the building, where the rents are the highest, should be the biggest. Explains Mergenthaler, “Instead of making a funny hat, we just played with the apartments,” expanding the floor plates still further and drawing the glass volumes closer to the edge so that the building appears to bloom as it reaches its zenith. This produced ten penthouses: On their first attempt, the designers may have conceived the ultimate land-to-money mechanism.

Not a bad showing from a bunch of flat-country architects. Having sidestepped the logistical pitfalls that come with designing a New York high-rise, the firm’s principals have proved they can play the game as well as anyone, and now they’re determined to do it again: They’re currently at work on a 25-story tower for hotelier Ian Schrager in the East Village, and they’re building skyscrapers elsewhere, including two (albeit somewhat modest ones) back in height-averse Basel. The truth is, says de Meuron, building big doesn’t mean departing from the same basic principles that have made the firm a success closer to the ground. “We start from the living activity, from the inside,” says the architect. “That way it becomes more of a unity.” ♦