

THE REAL DEAL

Gwathmey's best recent work in New York: Soho Mews

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By James Gardner

Last year's imaginative marketing of Soho Mews, an all but completed residential development at 311 West Broadway, seems to belong to a vanished world. Not only was Calvin Klein hired to design several of the units, but brokers were traveling across

Europe in hopes of getting the locals to invest their almighty Euros in the inflated, but to them relatively inexpensive, Manhattan real estate market.

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Now, of course, Europeans are suffering at least as much as we are from the economic downturn and the euro, though off its lows of a few months ago, has declined steeply against the dollar, with fewer tourists reaching our shores.

In the meantime, Soho Mews, with 68 apartments and nine stories tall, has reached completion — aside from a few finishing touches — and the results possess an undeniable dignity. The architect involved is the ever-busy Charles Gwathmey of Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects, the creator of the Astor Place tower and 240 Park Avenue South, among many other projects in New York and beyond.

From a purely formal perspective, Soho Mews may be his best work in New York in some time. Containing 175,000 square feet, with 5,000 feet reserved for commercial use, Soho Mews is a solidly restrained exercise in neo-Modernism. It is blessedly free of those contextual traces that vitiated 240 Park Avenue South, whose masonry cladding and watered-down historicism so clearly ran contrary to Gwathmey's preferred style. At the same time, the new building has none of the curves that adorned the summit of the Astor Place tower and that, while more typical of the architect, have proved controversial.



Instead, Soho Mews is a strictly rectilinear slab of a type that goes back ultimately to Le Corbusier's sundry "unités d'habitation" and beyond, to what the French architect was designing in Brazil in the 1930s. But Gwathmey has shown great tact and even imagination in modifying the modernist grid to give interest and variety to the building: covered in silvery cladding, its façade features a southern wall slightly thicker (visually) than the northern end, a subtle modulation that counter-balances the penthouse and above it, the mechanical core, which are oriented more to the north. Likewise, the thicker infill between the first and second floors serves to counteract the greater vertical weight of the penthouse.

Gwathmey famously prefers curves to angularity and, though these are absent from the façade, they recur in the lobby of the building, with rounded pylons and legato movements through space. Beyond the lobby is a landscaped courtyard on whose other side is the second building in the development, fashioned to much the same effect, on Wooster Street.

James Gardner, formerly the architecture critic of the New York Sun, writes on the visual arts for several publications.