

DESIGN

New York City Condominiums to Evoke Traditional Loft Aesthetic Through Modern Expression

New luxury lofts in lower Manhattan's SoHo district capture feel, fenestrations of bygone cast-iron era

by Russell Boniface
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How do you . . . develop a condominium that combines a city's architectural tradition with modern amenities?

Summary: New York City-based Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects has designed SoHo Mews, a residential condominium in New York City's SoHo Historic District, as a modern tribute to the distinctive cast iron architectural history of this revered location in downtown Manhattan. The two-building project consists of a nine-story structure and an eight-story structure, with a shared courtyard mews between each. The 175,000-square-foot project will offer 5,000 square feet of commercial space and 68 luxury loft units. Construction began last May.

SoHo, New York's historic "South of Houston" Street district, features 19th century buildings that were originally warehouses and factories. These structures have cast-iron facades with huge windows, some that even curved on building's corners. Facades are both simple and ornate, and were designed in various colors and styles, including Classical, Renaissance Revival, and French Second Empire. Facade ornaments include Corinthian columns, elaborate segmented arches, dormer windows on rooftops, and bracketed roof cornices. Many of the SoHo facades are still today partly obscured by fire escapes installed during the early part of the last century, when mandated by the fire department. Steetscape facades are linked, a heavy signature of this Manhattan location.



SoHo rose to fame as a neighborhood for artists during the 1960s and 1970s, when the industrial buildings were vacated by departing factories, then converted by artists into open and cheap lofts and studios. Later, the district became gentrified, with upscale stores and galleries. Situated at West

Broadway on the neighborhood's largest open buildable site, SoHo Mews will comprise two independent residential buildings—one fronting West Broadway and the other facing Wooster Street—linked by a private landscaped garden.

The irony of cast iron—its façade geometries hold up today

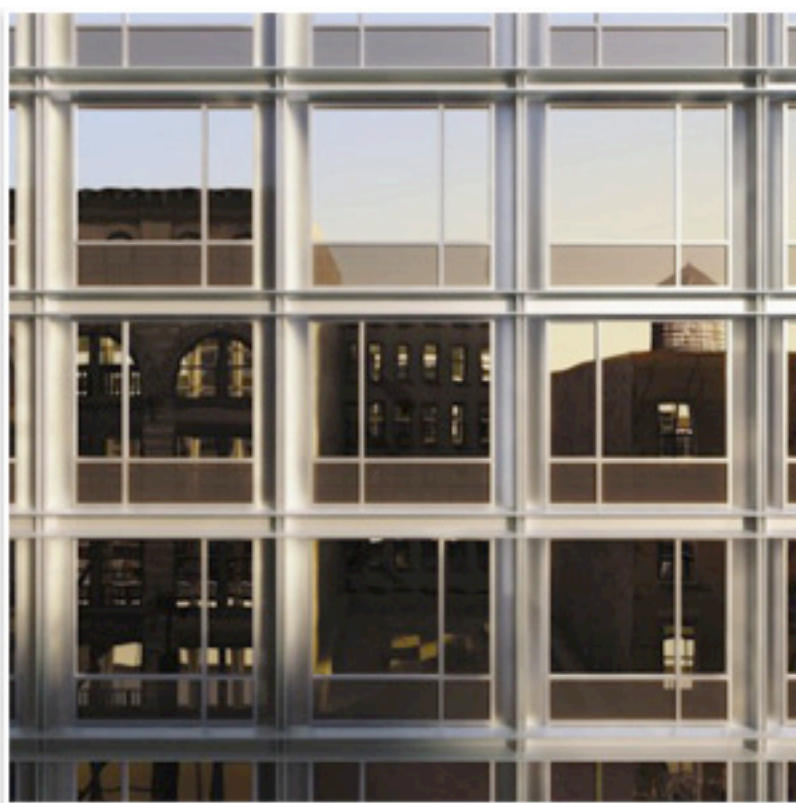
Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects designed the SoHo Mews enclave to be a modern expression of the district's 19th-century cast-iron fenestrations featured on its warehouses, factories, and, later, lofts and studios. SoHo Mews will rejoin adjacent facades—currently broken by the existing vacant lot upon which the project will be built—while matching the scale of the West Broadway and Wooster Street fronts.

The bifurcated architecture of each building features a stone base, a gray curtain wall of metal panels, and recessed glass, expressing horizontal and vertical channels of floor slabs and columns. While the use of metal cladding on each building gives a modern twist to the SoHo façade, it also recalls when SoHo's modular fenestrations evolved from cast iron to extruded metal to allow for more glass. The façades divide into two unequal zones of four and three bays, with a slightly off-center middle zone of two window bays. The shifting of the vertical mullions from bay to bay and floor to floor provides articulation of movement and rhythm to the façade, casting plays of light and shadow against clear, frosted, and fritted glass. The windows, storefronts, and entrances of SoHo Mews will also be divided by the structural channels to evoke the district's historic buildings.

On the top of each building are setback floors for four glass penthouse units with wrap-around terraces, each featuring an outdoor spa. A limestone interlude above hides the mechanical core, and a rooftop water tower—common among SoHo structures—picks up the gray of the facade, resuming the thrust of the slightly off-center middle zone.

The Soho Mews interior—a grand experience

The ground floor of the West Broadway building houses the main SoHo Mews lobby, retail stores, and an entry to the enclave's underground parking garage. The Wooster Street building has five individual townhouses at its base, consistent with the streetscape and its low-lying scale. Each townhouse has a private entry with a backyard "garden terrace" to the mews. Units overlooking the street and the landscaped yard have expansive floor-to-ceiling windows. Interior elements include rich woods, gray mist granite, stainless steel, and plank oak flooring to generate a sense of openness. In all, there will be 68 two- and three-bedroom luxury lofts, plus the five two-story townhouses and four penthouses.



"SoHo Mews will be a place for less traditional living," says Charles Gwathmey, FAIA, Gwathmey Siegel and Associates principal. "Its design is based on the ideas of the artist's loft, the varied and rich physical scale and architectural massing of a neighborhood, and the dynamic life of the streets. There's no place like SoHo. It's a wonderful place."

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Did you know . . .

- SoHo's cast iron buildings were built by many architects. Cast iron's fire-resistant properties, during a period of major urban fires, and tensile strength made it possible to erect large building facades at less cost than comparable stone fronts with speed and efficiency.
- Cast iron is an alloy with a high carbon content that makes it more resistant to corrosion than either wrought iron or steel.
- Green Street in SoHo has the highest concentration of cast-iron facades in the world: 40 buildings on five SoHo blocks.
- The E.V. Haughwout Building in SoHo was a symbol of cast iron's innovative use. Built in roughly a year's time, it was home to what *The New York Times* called "the greatest china and porcelain house in the city." When the Haughwout Building opened in 1857, it showcased New York City's first passenger-safety elevator.