

# The New York Times

## Town Houses With Condo Amenities



Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times

At Soho Mews the town houses have private doors on Wooster Street.

By **MARC SANTORA**  
Published: September 3, 2010



### A Choice

At Soho Mews, the town homes have private doors on Wooster Street (above). Owners can also enter their homes through the courtyard between their homes and the condominium on West Broadway. Top, an open kitchen in one of the town houses.

WHETHER brownstone in Harlem, limestone on the Upper East Side or red brick in the West Village, town houses are a defining feature of many Manhattan neighborhoods. Yet they now make up less than 1 percent of the borough's real estate market. And with the high cost of land and the expense of development, the opportunity for new town house construction is rare, which is why a handful of projects in the West Village and SoHo that include town houses, are attracting notice.

The developers and architects say they are propelling the town house into the modern era by providing the convenience and amenities of condominium living while working within the confines of historic neighborhoods.

Conceived at the height of the boom but only recently put on the market, the new town houses could hardly be less alike in style. At Soho Mews, on West Broadway between Grand and Canal Streets, the steel and glass design pays tribute to the cast-iron buildings that dominate the neighborhood.

Superior Ink, on Bethune Street between Washington and West Streets, adheres to the architect Robert A. M. Stern's nostalgic bent. And a block away at 385 West 12th Street, the developer/architect FLAnk has clad four town houses and accompanying condos in glimmering copper that will change color as it ages.

"One of the negatives of town houses in the past was that you also had to have a Jeeves," said Joanna Rose, the vice president of communications at Related, which developed Superior Ink, named after the factory that it replaced. "We solve that problem."

One way that has been done, in all three cases, is to connect the town houses to condominium projects.

A century ago, a young real estate broker named Douglas Elliman persuaded Senator Elihu Root of New York to move from his comfortable town house on Park Avenue to a new, luxurious apartment building at 998 Fifth Avenue — by cutting his rent.

With its rusticated limestone exterior and elaborate copper cornices, 998 Fifth, designed by McKim, Mead & White to evoke an Italian Renaissance palazzo, was soon hailed as one of the grandest structures in the city. Other prominent New Yorkers, including Guggenheims and Vanderbilts, soon moved in, setting off a transformation in urban living, said Michael Kovner, a vice president of Brown Harris Stevens who teaches a course on the city's real estate history for the Real Estate Board of New York.

In his book "Touring the Upper East Side: Walks in Five Historic Districts," Andrew S. Dolkart noted the transition. "At the time 998 was built, apartment house living had not yet been widely accepted by the very wealthy, but as The Real Estate Record noted, 998 helped to change the 'deep-seated repugnance' that 'families of high social position' had for apartments," he wrote.

Since then apartment living has been ascendant, but the sales success of the new projects — even at \$5 million and up — indicates that New York's moneyed elite still like their private homes. The average price for a Manhattan town house in 2010 was \$4.422 million, according to data provided the Corcoran Real Estate Group. The properties have held their value well in the recession, falling only 11 percent from the peak average price of \$4.972 million in 2008.

"One of the great reasons to buy a house is that they are really not making any more," said Patrick Vernon Lilly, a senior vice president of the Corcoran Group who specializes in town houses. "We are seeing a handful coming on the market, but generally, there are more lost to development than gained. It is a dwindling market and that keeps the prices of town houses very high, compared to the value of condos and co-ops."

The least expensive of the new town houses are at Soho Mews. Three of the five have already been sold, with the remaining two priced at \$4.95 million and \$5.675 million. Soho Mews was developed by United American Land. Albert Laboz, who runs the company with his brothers, Jason and Jody, said that until now they had largely focused on retail.

Just as developers turned to the star power of architects like McKim Mead & White at the turn of the last century to draw in clients, Mr. Laboz hired Gwathmey Siegel & Associates, perhaps best known for the addition to the Guggenheim Museum in the early 1990s.

Robert Siegel, the principal and founding partner of the firm, said the challenge was to stay consistent with the "vocabulary of the neighborhood" without simply mimicking its surroundings.

"The facades of the buildings were conceived as a contemporary reinterpretation of the historical cast-iron and glass facades of neighboring buildings," Mr. Siegel said. This was accomplished, he said, by creating a large-scale grid of channel-shaped metal elements that frame frosted, clear and fritted glass. The development, built on a former parking lot, is made up of two buildings divided by a central courtyard, with the condos making up one building on West Broadway, and town houses the other, on Wooster Street.

Lady Gaga showed up for a viewing at Soho Mews in what appeared to be underwear, and complained that there were too many windows, said Jessica Geiger, a spokeswoman at Dan Klores Communications, the building's publicist. But Sean Sweeney, the director of the SoHo Alliance, a civic group, said the project was "an architectural success" and praised the developers for working with community leaders from the outset.

"They did it the right way," Mr. Sweeney said. "They came to us very early on with the plans and they asked for a meeting with the community, which in SoHo and downtown in general is a very smart idea because we are the Nimby capital of the country," he said.



**Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times** The view from the kitchen of one of the four town houses at 385 West 12th Street. Owners have the use of the condominium's rooftop lap pool.

During construction, some neighbors did complain about damage to their properties.

Owners of town houses at Soho Mews can enter via the sleek lobby of the condominium on West Broadway, which looks like a hotel with its walnut concierge desk, and pass through the 4,000-square-foot courtyard on the way to their homes. Or they can use their own private entrances, oversized pivoting glass doors, on Wooster Street.

"I have worked with a lot of famous people and the thing that many of them want is anonymity," said Mr. Lilly of the Corcoran Group. "They can slide into a town house and out of a town house without being recognized by other people in the building."

Still, many affluent buyers also want the amenities and services that come with being part of a larger development. And they are willing to pay a premium for it, including monthly fees ranging from \$3,000 to \$7,000 on top of the multimillion dollar purchases.

For owners of the seven town houses lining the far west end of Bethune Street that are a part of Superior Ink, that means access to an entertainment room, screening room and a gym. Just as at Soho Mews, rear entrances provide an alternative to the traditional front door. There is also valet bike parking.



**Sara Krulwich/The New York Times** A rear entrance to a town house at Superior Ink. Owners have access to the concierge at the associated condominium on West 12th Street.

Building in the West Village presents very different challenges, in part because town houses are an embedded part of the fabric of the neighborhood.

Superior Ink supplanted one of the last factories in the area, which drew attention to the project from the start. The much smaller FLAnk project, on the other hand, replacing only Diane Von Furstenberg's mansion and another town house, did not attract as much notice, which is not to say that everybody likes the prominent copper facade.

Andrew Berman, the executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, said that the demolition of older buildings to make room for the new developments was a loss for the neighborhood.

"Both projects turned out pretty much as we expected," Mr. Berman said.

"The Superior Ink town houses are a kind of historicist stage set, while the FLAnk project is more modern exhibitionism," he said. "I miss the 19th- and early-20th-century factory buildings they replaced; but fortunately, while the city refused to landmark those buildings, we have been able to get much of the rest of the far West Village landmarked, and thus most of the neighborhood's remaining industrial and maritime architecture will be preserved."

The two neighboring projects approached the modern town house in very different ways. Mr. Stern, who designed both the town houses and the larger condominium tower of Superior Ink, looked to the past, creating town houses reminiscent of those built 100 years ago. With red-brick facades, stoops rising to the front door, bay windows and curved metal railings, there is little to indicate that they have any connection to the tower.

“The people looking at these homes are not looking for the ‘Austin Powers’ kind of look,” said Ms. Rose of Related.

The marketing of the project calls upon an idealized past in a hard-bound prospectus. “The graceful, expansive floor plans, blend of lavish materials and subtle architectural details,” it informs prospective buyers, “display a richness and confidence that evoke the grandeur of earlier West Village eras.”

Mr. Kovner said: “New money wants something bespoke.”

The interiors of the town houses, which range from 24 to 29 feet wide, are also a throwback, with grand parlors for entertaining and dumbwaiters so that cooks and caterers can prepare food out of view.

But there are also nods to the way people live today: wide-open floor plans, midnight kitchenettes in floor-through master suites and landscaped rooftops.

Four of the seven town houses have sold, including one for more than \$10 million to the designer Marc Jacobs. The remaining three are even pricier.

Just a block away on West 12th Street, FLAnk decided to go in a different direction, with asymmetrical walls of copper and glass.

“The building looks hyper-modern, but the spaces inside are much more warm than you might think,” said Brett Miles, a broker with Brown Harris Stevens who is helping sell units in the building.

The 12-story building is a combination of town houses and condominiums. With construction just being completed, three of the four town houses have already been sold for between \$7 and \$8 million. The last town house is priced at \$7.95 million. Owners have access to a common rooftop garden, including a heated 50-foot lap pool and a whirlpool bath, which will be open year-round.

But technically, because the town houses are part of larger building, they are maisonettes — which is itself a marketing term coined by developers almost 100 years ago to lure in apartment buyers.