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Putting Out the Welcome Mat

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SOHO is not exactly thought of as the most welcoming place for new development. But sometimes, the neighborhood does get along with developers.

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Neighborhood Project A rendering of the SoHo Mews, designed by Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects, which will have condos and town houses.

There has been close cooperation between the neighborhood and a developer and architecture team on a project under construction on the largest buildable site left in the area, called SoHo Mews. The luxury residential development will consist of a condo building on West Broadway, town houses that front Wooster Street, and a courtyard in between.

“It is rare, if not unique, where a developer and an architect worked so closely with the community,” said Sean Sweeney, the director of the SoHo Alliance, an umbrella organization of community groups.

The developer, United American Land, is a family-owned company run by the Laboz brothers — Albert, Jason and Jody — who have owned property in SoHo for years, but had not undertaken a project of this magnitude in the

neighborhood.

“I was nervous,” Albert Laboz said. “This is my family’s money, so I wanted to make sure we weren’t going to get in a fight with people. So I went to the community and asked them what they wanted. It took longer. But it’s worth it.”

United American Land bought what had been a parking lot just north of Canal Street more than two years ago, and immediately began talking with Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects to design a modern interpretation of the famed cast-iron buildings in SoHo.

The result will be two buildings totaling 175,000 square feet, with 68 luxury units, priced at \$2.1 million to \$11 million.

The ground floor of the West Broadway building houses the main residential lobby as well as stores and an entry to an underground parking garage. In both buildings, the floors above will have two- and three-bedroom loft units overlooking the street and the interior courtyard from floor-to-ceiling windows. On the top setback floors of the buildings are four glass penthouse units with wraparound terraces.

The Wooster Street building has five town houses at its base in deference to the street’s quieter low-rise character. The town houses are three-, four- or five-bedrooms with private entries. Each town house has a secluded backyard, set within the landscaped courtyard, that is accessible through an industrial-inspired nesting glass wall system that opens the interior to the outside.

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The collaborative process behind the SoHo Mews is also likely to mean it will get a better reception from its neighbors than did the Sculpture for Living at Astor Place, the Gwathmey Siegel luxury condo building that landed like a spaceship in the East Village, was reviewed poorly and did not sell well.

“You can’t judge an entire body of work by one building,” Albert Laboz said. “But I want this to be their comeback building.”

Charles Gwathmey took issue with that characterization, but agreed that the projects are different.

“I think Astor Place is great,” Mr. Gwathmey said. “This is not a comeback building. That’s his perception as a developer, which is fine, but I don’t think of it that way. Astor Place has its own identity. SoHo Mews is much more of a mural and streetscape-oriented.”

Indeed, it is the streetscape orientation, or the facade on West Broadway, that steals the show. The architects sought to simulate the depth of the cast-iron facades, which take up a lot of floor space, through detailing, including three types of glass, and by breaking the building’s front into three parts, with a center that is vertically oriented and has two flanking sides.

The stone base and curtain wall of metal panels and recessed glass allude to but do not overtly mimic classic SoHo materials and design.

“This facade is going to emit and absorb different light, day and night, because of the different glasses and the way the structure is articulated,” Mr. Gwathmey said.

His partner, Robert Siegel, added: “The facade floats a few inches in front of the columns, providing an area between the two, so layers of drapery can be adjusted. The idea was to maximize glass and have owners create as much light and privacy as they wanted.”

The interior courtyard will be designed by Peter Walker, who is doing the World Trade Center memorial landscape design.

There will also be a small but public gallery space run by the Art Production Fund, a SoHo-based nonprofit arts group, which will also curate work to be displayed in the courtyard and throughout open spaces in the building.

SoHo Mews is only the second building to go through a permitting process implemented in 2003 specific to the area. It came about after many fights involving residents, developers and the city.

The new rules mandate that all new apartments are a minimum of 1,200 square feet, and that no new eating and drinking establishments are allowed, among other bulk and height limits. In addition, all designs have to be seen by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, the city’s Department of Planning, the community board and neighborhood groups.

“To go through this kind of a process and come out of it at the end so positive, it’s unique,” Mr. Siegel said.

“This could be an example for how other neighborhoods could welcome development and have input.”

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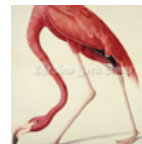
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