

15 Union Square West: A historic building gets reborn, and then some

BY JASON SHEFFELL

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The living room, with 16-foot ceilings and cast-iron stanchions. (JOYCE FOR NEWS)

Even if you didn't know its history or architecture, 15 Union Square West blows you away the second you walk into its model apartment.

A giant 31-by-21-foot room with 16-foot ceilings and 17-foot low-iron impeccably clear windows overlooking Union Square would normally be enough to overwhelm your real estate senses. But then you'd see the 15-foot cast-iron stanchions. Left over from the building's first life as the 1897 [Tiffany & Co.](#) headquarters, they curve toward the high ceilings like your own personal Roman aqueduct.

Don't worry if you don't know what a stanchion is; I didn't either. Like the iron poles that hold together velvet ropes at a nightclub, a stanchion is an upright bar, post or frame forming a support or barrier. [Eran Chen](#), the architect, and [Brack Capital Real Estate](#), the developer, decided to highlight the stanchions, making them the focal point of the apartments on the building's first five floors.

Chen, then with [Perkins Eastman](#) and now running his own firm, ODA, enveloped the stanchions in a glass structure, constructing a building within a building fronted by low-iron Austrian glass. (I didn't know this either, but low-iron glass means it's clearer, completely see-through at night, and reflective during the day. A luxury building down the street has windows that appear warped in the sun. These do not.)

As if that's not enough, Chen created a series of sky villas on top of the original building. Almost all of them have huge terraces with park views.

With interiors by [New York's Vicente Wolf](#), one of the world's top designers, the homes have exquisite details like 2-inch-tall horizontal air slits, uniform shades that come down from the top and up from the bottom, claw-foot bathtubs, limestone and oak foyers, and shagreen finishes - made of shark skin - under the master bathroom sinks. (Shagreen perfectly absorbs bathroom moisture and is easy to clean, something else I didn't know. Perfected by the master leather worker for [France's King Louis XV](#), it's so rough, it feels smooth. Just touching it was luxury.)

Are you getting it yet? This is the finest, most complex and maybe even magical new condominium project currently for sale in [New York City](#). Here's its story.



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-The History: Built in 1897, the Tiffany & Co. building at 15 Union Square West (USW) was one of the most ornate cast-iron structures in the city. At that time, Union Square was a luxury commercial corridor. As the city's wealth shifted uptown, so did retailers. [Amalgamated Bank](#) took over the Tiffany building on Union Square.

In 1952, a piece of the original cast iron fell off the building's façade, striking a [Brooklyn](#) man who later died of his injuries. In response to the accident, Amalgamated stripped the building of all its cast iron except the stanchions. Holding up the building, they were hidden between a layer of sheetrock on the inside and white brick on the outside.

"We knew this building had something special inside," says architect Chen. "We had to decide what to do with it. Other developers wanted to demolish it. Not Brack. We all saw an opportunity to do something incredible here."

-The Developer: Incredible meant keep the stanchions and allow the floors to be high enough so that each apartment enjoyed the full view of the park through windows as tall as the original building's ceiling height. Most developers would have cut these floors up, forming as many apartments as possible to maximize space and profit. Brack, who renovated 90 West St. after the [World Trade Center](#) tragedy, ties preservation to profit.

"It was clear to us that we owed it to New York to bring this back as much as we could," says [Issac Hera](#), managing director and CFO of Brack Capital Real Estate. "The trick was to make a modern home out of something historic. This project is so special, it will be hard to let go. I almost don't want to finish it. When something is this good, you just have to show it to people. That's all. You don't even have to talk about it."

-The Architect: Eran Chen visited the site more than a dozen times, staring at it, walking Union Square, imagining what would go there. All he could think about was how to keep the original structure visible to people inside the apartments and on the street.

"Every site has a certain inherited character," says Chen. "You cannot change that. You have to have a deep understanding of what the site is and what it wants to be. We looked for the right glass that at night would be so clear, people walking by could see the stanchions. To make sure the residents could have some privacy, we put in shades that rise from the floor that are more opaque. The shades that come down from the top are not as thick. I wanted also to have as much outdoor space for the new apartments on top of the old building. It becomes a part of the park now."

-The Interior Designer: Vicente Wolf is a world traveler. He goes where most travelers do not. He has been to [Ethiopia](#), the hills of [Bhutan](#), [Madagascar](#) and [Papua New Guinea](#). In his knapsack and head, he brings products back.

For 15 USW, Wolf hand-drew the bathroom fixtures and doorknobs, created jointly with home hardware manufacturer [Sherle Wagner](#). A bathroom spout can weigh up to 7 pounds. The interior doorknob, called the Nugget, retails for \$287.

Brack hired Wolf because he combines ancient design motifs with modern materials. He has designed for [Clive Davis](#). In the model apartment, Wolf topped an ancient drum with stone to match the front foyer. To accentuate height, he used recently fabricated tall and thin Egyptian vases as decorative objects.

"I do not accept what is common experience," says Wolf, who has authored two photography books. "Seeing things in different parts of the world frees me from local convention."

-The Sales: In a tough market, 15 USW is 45% sold, with daily calls to its marketer, Brown Harris Stevens (BHS) Select, to see the sky villas on top. The lower apartments fronting the park are all but sold, selling from \$4 million to \$6 million per unit.

By withholding from sale the three-bedroom model apartment and the two-bedroom unit next door, BHS Select can market the units as one single five-bedroom, six-bath, 5,000-plus-square-foot home with 70 feet of windows facing [Union Square Park](#). The potential apartment is being marketed at \$12 million.

"This would be one of the premier apartments in New York," says [Shlomi Reuveni](#), senior managing director of BHS Select. **"This entire building is proof that when everything for a project works - location, finishes, design, amenities, history - it will sell, and fast. Did I mention the amenities? There's a two-lane 50-foot lap pool made of Bisazza stone. That's unheard of for a building of this size. And valet parking."**

Enough already. We said it's the best. I don't even know what Bisazza stone is.

Go to www.15usw.com for more information.

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