# Life at the Top

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Photography by Michel Arnaud

FASCINATION WITH REAL estate is not a new phenomenon, and New York City's rich and varied array of luxury apartment buildings has long held particular allure. From the moment the stately and picturesque Dakota arose on the underdeveloped land of the Upper West Side in the early 1880s, the city's great apartment houses, with their elegant facades and distinctive silhouettes punctuating the skyline, their sprawling floor plans and exquisitely designed interiors, have never ceased to intrigue. Because of Manhattan's limited geography and rapid population growth at the end of the 19th century, expansion was possible only northward and upward. These dictates—combined with the invention of the elevator—contributed to the creation of the apartment building as we know it. What began with the Dakota as a novelty has become a building type that New Yorkers can truly call their own.

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**Previous Page:** A 432 Park Avenue master bedroom enjoys an unrivaled view looking south toward the Empire State Building, One World Trade Center, and the Hudson River.

**Left:** Originally designed for mining magnate Murray Guggenheim and his wife, Leonie, 998 Fifth Avenue's historic interiors were updated by Thomas Jayne, his color schemes highlighting the architecture of the rooms.

**Following Page Top:** Known for her exuberant and colorful décor, designer Katie Ridder refreshed the living room of the 720 Park Avenue duplex apartment. Chairs from Carlton House Restoration with burnt orange Edelman leather seats and arms bring out the same color in the Colefax and Fowler rug. A Rajasthani portrait hangs above the black-and-gilt side table.

**Following Page Bottom:** The teahouse— the urban incarnation of a Palladian garden folly— is the pièce de résistance of the 778 Park Avenue rooftop duplex. Landscape designer Maureen Hackett introduced trees, shrubs, perennials, and seasonal flowers to the terraces, creating a rooftop oasis that offers unrivaled views of the cityscape and Central Park.

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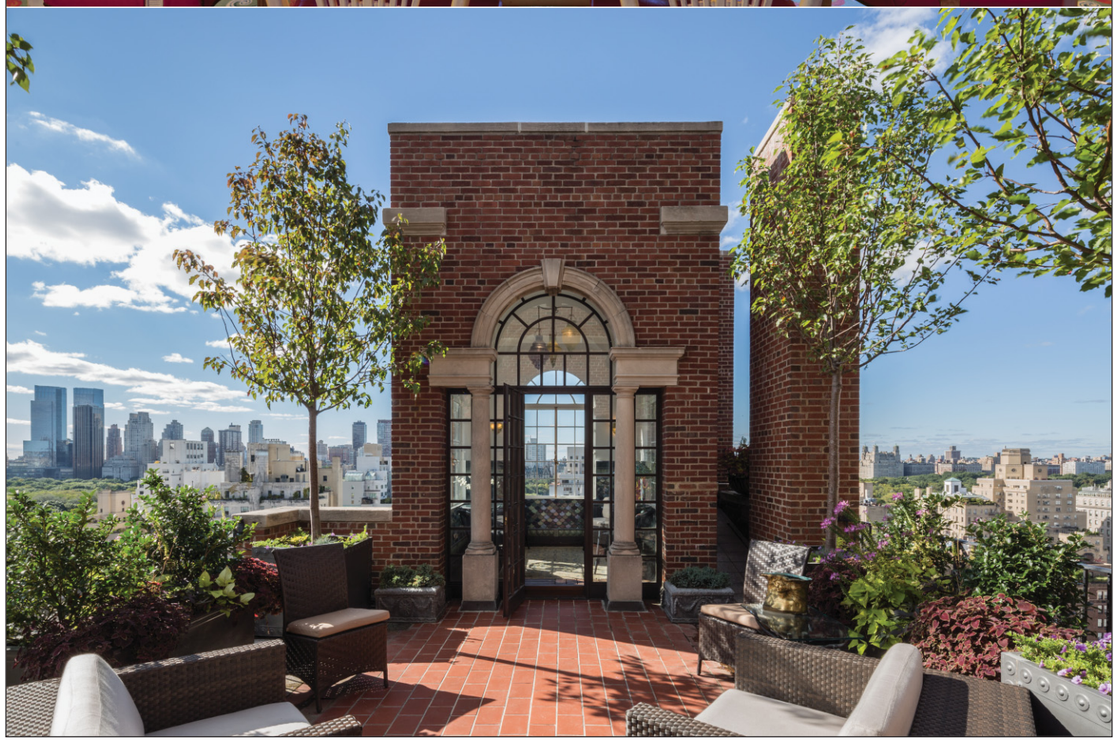
We can trace the development of apartment living for the top echelons of New York society through two major transitions. The first began at the end of the Gilded Age, when a growing number of wealthy New Yorkers migrated from fussily ornate Belle Époque mansions into elegantly designed apartment buildings. The second began at the turn of the 21st century with Richard Meier's sleekly contemporary Perry Street towers and continues to this day. Both transitions were fueled by remarkably similar factors: a wave of staggering wealth accumulation, the development of new technologies and materials, a desire for a more convenient, less cluttered "modern" lifestyle, a need to build vertically, and an increasing focus on major architects, now known as "starchitects," and exceptional interior designers.

Before 1900, the concept of apartment living had emerged but remained the precinct of the lower and middle classes; the townhouse was still considered the norm. As *The Architectural Record* remarked in 1901, "To the New Yorker of thirty years ago, the apartment house was an exotic. Every good Knickerbocker, with even the most modest pretensions, considered it his duty to house his family with four walls wherein he would be the sole lord and master; and the highest reach of his ambition was a brownstone front." Gradually, however, the economies and conveniences of vertical living expanded to the higher economic and social echelons, culminating in the widely publicized construction of the Dakota on Central Park West. Though the Dakota may have been built for people of means, it was not intended for the top tiers of society. It remains a virtuosic exemplar of late 19th-century architecture and layouts: stylistic confection, labeled variously as German Renaissance and Gothic Revival, featuring an elegant carriage entrance accessing an interior courtyard and expansive rooms with high ceilings and sumptuous finishes. For its time, the Dakota offered state-of-the-art services and technology, including a private dining room for residents, hydraulic elevators, and electric lights.

The definitive moment for Manhattan's luxury apartment living arrived in 1912 with McKim, Mead & White's 998 Fifth Avenue, located directly across from the Metropolitan Museum. It was palatial and without peer. Each of the 17 enormous apartments was appointed with the finest of details, including high, coffered ceilings, imported paneling, elaborate plasterwork and moldings, and a long, spacious gallery. As the American champions of the Beaux-Arts tradition, McKim, Mead & White designed 998 in the refined neo-Italian Renaissance style that dominated the ensuing building boom of equally grand, elegant apartment houses along Fifth and Park Avenues on the Upper East Side. The all-limestone building also provided a large staff of porters and elevator operators, thereby reducing the number of servants needed by the individual owners. Nevertheless, each apartment had five or six small servants' bedrooms, a "servant's hall" for staff meals, secondary back staircases, laundry and pressing rooms, and locked rooms for valuables. The building became so renowned that it was referred to simply as "998" or as "The Millionaires' Apartments." The success of 998 triggered the first boom in opulent apartment house construction, which lasted through the 1920s and early 1930s but was brought to an abrupt end by the Depression. The period saw the predominance of a classical style, far more refined and elegant than the previous Victorian and Edwardian styles, as well as the emergence of the streamlined Art Deco style in the late 1920s. Fortunately, this era was blessed with truly gifted architects, including J. E. R. Carpenter, Rosario Candela, and Cross & Cross. The original owners of apartments in these buildings lavished attention on their interiors, decorating the walls with art, often installing imported architectural details to enhance their living space, and commissioning the services of talented interior designers. They and succeeding generations of residents looked to designers like Dorothy Draper, who created many of Manhattan's most remarkable apartment lobbies, Elsie de Wolfe, Jean-Michel Frank, and Sister Parish.

Arguably, no buildings with truly large, grand apartments were built between the 1930s and the advent of the twenty-first century. At the turn of this century, however, a new round of massive wealth accumulation instigated the



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most radical change in luxury housing preferences in 100 years. Just as 998 Fifth heralded the transition to a classical style and grand apartment buildings on the Upper East Side, the tremendous success of the Robert A. M. Stern-designed 15 Central Park West in 2005 signaled a clear shift toward high-rise apartment buildings, contemporary styling, and a renewed emphasis on building services. The 43-story condominium includes such amenities as a private driveway to screen residents from paparazzi, a screening room, and a professionally equipped, 14,000-square-foot fitness center with a 75-foot swimming pool. This trend has coincided with the

**Previous Page Top:** As exemplified in a Beresford living room, Delphine Krakoff's interiors contain a sophisticated mix of mid-century furnishings. The custom-made sofas, upholstered in a Holly Hunt fabric, add a touch of lavender to the bright white living room. Hervé Van der Straeten's "Branches" mirror hangs above the Louis XIV-style mantel, an Art Deco baby grand piano complimenting the custom-made Beauvais carpet after an André Arbus design.

**Previous Page Bottom:** The walls of the upstairs smoking room in the palatial 834 Fifth Avenue duplex are covered in 17th-century leather panels; an 18th-century Swedish painting hangs above the sofa, flanked by bookcases from Steinitz. A clock from the collection of Hubert de Givenchy sits atop the bookshelf between the windows, with silver Russian cigar boxes adorning the coffee table. Architect Thierry Despont and legendary designer Henri Samuel were enlisted in 1984 to reconfigure and decorate what is one of the largest original apartments on Fifth Avenue.

**Right:** The Milan-based interior design team of twin sisters Nathalie and Virginie Droulers used a palette of light green and beige in a 15 Central Park West living room, creating a calm aerie in the sky. The centerpiece is a round coffee table ringed with cushion seating that Nathalie designed after a piece belonging to a friend of the owners. The sofas were custom-made in Italy.

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rejuvenation of lower Manhattan neighborhoods such as Tribeca, the High Line in Chelsea, the Financial District, and the Flatiron that previously had been as remote to the city's upper echelons as the Dakota in the 1880s. This is evidenced by the large number of new construction projects designed by such "starchitects" as Richard Meier, Norman Foster, Zaha Hadid, and Herzog & de Meuron. Nonetheless, the grandest and most costly of these new, exceptionally tall towers are located in Midtown. The finest example of this trend is 432 Park Avenue at 56th Street, designed by Rafael Viñoly. At 96 stories, it is currently the tallest residential building in the Western Hemisphere—at least until the next one is completed—and appeals to the significant influx of hugely wealthy foreign buyers.

Dramatic shifts in lifestyle and design have marked Manhattan's most luxurious residences over the past 130 years. From Beaux-Art mansions to predominantly classically styled cooperatives and then, 80 years later, to high-rise glass condominiums. From downtown to uptown and back downtown again. From formal, seated black-tie dinners for 40 with 40 in staff to order-in meals from the building's gourmet restaurant. Such transitions always generate intense debates between the various factions: uptown versus downtown, classical versus contemporary. Regardless of one's stylistic preference, there is still truth in the expression *de gustibus non disputandum est*, or "in matters of taste, there can be no dispute." SR

**Left:** The garden room of 998 Fifth Avenue replaced a modern Japanese-style addition that previously stood in its place, the Italianate style more appropriately matching the building. Architect Basil Walter worked with the owners to restore the apartment to its former glory after an extensive modernization in the 1970s. Using McKim, Mead & White's original drawings, old details were restored and those that had been lost were recreated.

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