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Two New Buildings Break Free of the Glass Straitjacket

By Justin Davidson



Annabelle Selldorf's 10 Bond Street. Photo: Busà Photography/Getty Images

If you've ever squinted at the Manhattan skyline, shielding your eyes against the intensifying glare, you may have felt that the entire city is being laminated in glass. Even real-estate moguls have started to notice what they've wrought. You occasionally hear them sigh at the prospect of "another glass building," even when they're the ones putting them up. One developer recently admitted remorse and disappointment over the see-through tower he'd just completed.

Brick, granite, limestone, copper, zinc, terra-cotta, wood — these materials with long pedigrees in New York construction have never quite disappeared from the city's exteriors, but for decades they were demoted to supporting roles. Robert A.M. Stern kept the flame with his limestone palazzo at 15 Central Park West; Roman and Williams dressed up their Chelsea hotel the Fitzroy in jade-green tiles; and SHoP Architects came to prominence with the zinc-clad Porter House. These have mostly been outliers, deliberately contrarian answers to the persistence of tight-lipped modernism.

Now they look prescient. The glass stampede may finally be receding just a bit, at least in a few residential buildings expensive enough to justify the cost but not strategically positioned to offer IMAX-style views. Annabelle Selldorf's six-story apartment building at 10 Bond Street and SHoP Architects' American Copper Buildings, on First Avenue at East 36th Street, intimate a less transparent future, in which the ancient joys of texture, shadow, depth, and local character mix with unmistakably contemporary design.

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At Selldorf's radically soft-spoken Bond Street condo, a thick grid of nut-brown glazed terra-cotta and weathered steel outlines ample windows. Terra-cotta — Italian for “baked earth” — has a rich local history. It makes up the ceiling of the Oyster Bar in Grand Central Terminal, the carved ornaments on the Flatiron Building, and the whole exterior of Louis Sullivan's [Bayard-Condict Building](#). Cast in flamboyant filigree and glazed in high-gloss, white terra-cotta turned Cass Gilbert's 1913 Woolworth Building into a marvel of teeming detail. Selldorf's use is more restrained but still warmly sensual. Concave tubes and convex bundles cross, like ripples from separate stones intersecting on a still pond. The vertical line drops away at the corner, so that each window makes the 90-degree turn, pane to pane, without so much as a steel strip between them. That sudden subtraction draws attention to the rest of the bulky frame, making 10 Bond feel like a terra-cotta building with big windows rather than a glass building with terra-cotta trim.

For Selldorf, historical materials focus the architect's attention on details that register at street level, that gratify a human desire for intimacy, even in the middle of a megametropolis. “People aren't much bigger than they ever used to be,” she says. And yet glass skyscrapers look like habitats for giants. Curtain walls make even immense towers seem like seamless objects, so that their size is hard to gauge from a distance. Up close they appear forbiddingly slick. Selldorf has little patience with architects who compensate for this blankness with extravagant gestures or attention-getting contortions of form. “Terra-cotta encourages you to think about color and shape in a finer way,” she says, “without having prove that a building can stand on one leg.”

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Such finesse costs money. On a large building, every tailored decision, each learning curve and departure from normal practice gets multiplied many times over. A heavier panel requires a stronger steel clip to hold it in place, for instance, and that may have to be modified or specially designed. “In Cass Gilbert's era, many companies made a variety off-the-shelf shapes,” Selldorf says. “Today it's all custom.”

Terra-cotta is cast, so the artistry lies in the mold, which is carved by hand or, these days, shaped with a computer-controlled milling machine. The result can be a plain flat tile or a surface with crests and depth. To get the right effect, Selldorf teamed up with [Boston Valley](#), a manufacturer in western New York that cranked out tests and mock-ups until she got just the right curve, richness, and hue.

It's a tautology to say that glass is common because it's cheap. Whatever gets used most is cheapest: More companies manufacture it, develop efficient production techniques, and standardize installation routines. Specify a glass curtain wall, and every large contractor in the city will be able to calculate to the dollar how much it will cost. Ask for zinc, and a contractor is likely to add a hefty markup just for the bother of learning something new. The most economical choice is always the one that's been made many times before. Less isn't more, it's just cheaper.

Unless the developer is up for some experimentation, with all the attendant costs and risks, many design choices are essentially made before the architect even gets hired. Even when clients are willing to pay for something special, they are at the mercy of a global industry that churns out a menu of façade materials about as deceptively varied as toothpaste: Most products are pretty much the same, with inconsequential differences in flavor.

A couple of generations ago, a masonry wall was just that: a wall made of stones, cut to fit and stacked one on top of the other. Today, stone is more likely to be a veneer applied to an insulated panel that, despite its invisibility, does all the labor of keeping the weather out. That's why so many buildings are clothed in prefabricated sections that can be installed in a quick and repetitive sequence. When the surface is painted metal, they barely need to be maintained.

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In the case of American Copper, JDS Development approached SHoP with a thorny task: turn an awkward plan that had already gone through the public-review rigmarole and turn it into a thing of beauty — one that wouldn't need any new approvals. The L-shaped lot wrapped around an existing school, and the zoning called for two slablike towers rising on a new mini-park. SHoP treated the towers as if they were a dancer's legs, both bending at the knee but in different directions, so that they almost touch. At that point of not-quite-contact, a sky bridge containing a long pool and a vast gym joins the two separate buildings, giving the eastern edge of Manhattan a jaunty new silhouette.



At center and left, SHoP's American Copper Buildings. The bridge between the two towers contains a swimming pool. Photo: Bo Zaunders/Getty Images

What really gives the two buildings their shared identity, though, is the copper cladding on the broad sides of the façades. Those metal jackets open from top to toe to leave sheets of naked glass looking east and west. But it's the north and south faces that observers remember, in part because they make the building feel like an old analog photo emerging from the chemical bath. Even while it was under construction, its shiny-penny look was already weathering to a dark brown, on its way to mossy green in some undefined future. Salt spray wafting up from the East River, fumes from the entrance to the Midtown Tunnel and the FDR Drive, the complex gyrations of wind and rain — all these forces will mottle the surface in ways nobody can quite predict. A copper skin is like a tree's trunk, a living document of time and climatic vagaries.

Like tooled leather or a wind-carved cliff, a façade shows off the forces that made it and will change in time. Glass either remains intact or it fails. If a seal cracks and moisture creeps in between the layered panes, a cloudy patch appears, and it doesn't add personality to the pane but merely ruins it. Opaque materials are different. A terra-cotta tile can last for decades, retaining its sheen as the rain sluices off the gritty deposits that precipitate out of polluted city air. But its longevity isn't binary; it can get old without breaking down. Over time, it may develop a filigree of tiny cracks, the odd chip, a hole or notch here or there. These imperfections, difficult to repair, simply get tolerated, like pocks and cuts in an old wooden table, or wrinkles on aged skin, and they accumulate into a record of experience. Buildings stand long enough to witness a city's wild evolution all around them, and some of those changes register on its face.

Copper has strong New York associations, and not just because it's the stuff of Liberty. The Woolworth Building itself wears an immense copper crown, and the blue-green patina pops up in window bays, church domes, mansards, and finials all over the city. On First Avenue, the design picks up the metal's vitality in the arrangement of staggered windows, which appear to be sliding toward the corners of the building.

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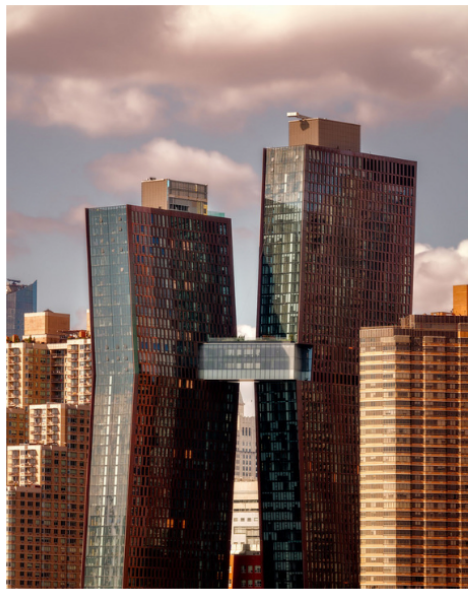
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That sense of liveness, mutability, and natural change flows down into the plaza between the buildings, designed by Kate Orff's firm SCAPE. With its planted hillocks, artfully placed boulders, and long wood-slat benches resting on bases of weathered steel, this is a little patch of Arcadia moated by traffic. It's tough out there for a plant. Oily mist from the FDR Drive overhead is browning the east-facing row of trees and bushes. Even so, SCAPE has managed to carve a charming pocket wilderness, complete with a trail of flagstones that cross an artificial stream.

SHoP co-founder Gregg Pasquarelli insists copper's return isn't about reviving a vintage fashion or invoking the city's Beaux Arts past. The firm's architects, he says, select their materials for the function they serve and the feelings they evoke; the choice is pragmatically emotional. "There's a reason you can still use traditional materials like copper and terra-cotta: They perform well," Pasquarelli says. "They break down the scale of a building and give it texture. You can connect with them. It's not nostalgic. Copper is in our arsenal. We'll use it forever."



SHoP's American Copper Buildings. Photo: Csaba Henriksen/Getty Images/iStockphoto

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