

STREET VIEW | 2:53 P.M.

Brick Is Back

Even the most prolific builders of glass towers have rediscovered texture, shadow, and drama.

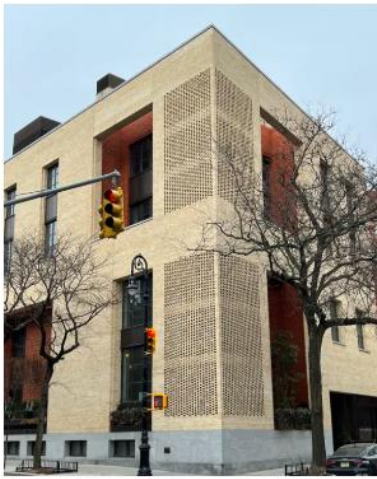


By Justin Davidson, *New York Magazine's* architecture and classical-music critic



It's not all Richard Meier's fault, but I blame him anyway. The now nonagenarian architect of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles transformed New York about 25 years ago, when he designed [three glass-skinned apartment buildings](#) that line up along West Street between Perry and Charles like TVs stacked in a big-box store, an assortment of hi-res lives flickering on every floor. When that trio of habitable devices came online in the early 2000s, it popularized the California romance of the see-through home — or rather, it turned the concept inside out. Instead of living rooms facing onto an unpeopled ocean, Meier offered unfiltered views of the indoor life as seen from the river's edge. Mid-century L.A. architects like Richard Neutra had put the world on display for their clients; Meier put his clients on display for the world.

What followed was a [stampede of glass](#). Most everyone wanted to live the aquarium life, though preferably high enough off the ground to be out of range for ordinary pedestrians. The result was a [cityscape of relentless sheen](#), façades as glabrous and ageless as a starlet's brow. Office buildings and apartment towers remained fundamentally different in physique, but they dressed in the same crystalline outfits, as if vainly attempting not to be seen at all. "There was a mania," says James Von Klemperer, the president of Kohn Pedersen Fox, a global firm that played a major role in promoting it. "The more glass the better, because it communicated a hypertechnical approach to architecture. And who doesn't like daylight?" Opacity was dead.



From left: The 30,000-foot brick mansion that Leroy Studio designed for Steve Cohen (left) is a block away from Richard Meier's all-glass triplets (right). Photo: Justin Sullivan; Photo: Justin Sullivan.

Finally, though, the shiny new thing has grown old, and the rough old thing is being revived. Brick, stone, and terra-cotta, products that have the solidity and hue of earth, have timidly but perceptibly snuck back into New York's repertoire of architectural ambitions. Just a block away from Meier's trio of bespoke beakers, the firm Leroy Studio has built a brick-and-terra-cotta rejoinder at 145 Perry Street: a massive [single-family home](#) masquerading as a nested pair of small apartment buildings. In this part of the West Village, where the city's residential and industrial histories overlap, 19th- and 20th-century builders of sturdy, low-budget structures had a limited choice of palettes: mostly red or cream-colored brick. Leroy used both hues, slipping a dark-skinned retreat behind an off-white veil. A perforated screen of staggered bricks turns the corner at Washington Street; openings in the wall give onto recessed windows, like a mask that leaves the wearer's sunken eyes exposed. This is anti-exhibitionistic architecture, a private mansion that offers only tantalizing glimpses of itself.

Even at the height of the transparency fad, New York had plenty of old brick and stone left, of course, ranging in quality from rickety tenements to the 1880s triumphs of New York Romanesque, the [Puck Building](#) and the [De Vinne Press Building](#), which combined delicacy and brawn. New masonry façades materialized now and then. In historic districts, the Landmarks Preservation Commission demanded that new designs relate to the old. Affordable housing and cheaply built condos made use of prefabricated panels with metal membranes or brick veneer. At the other end of the market, Robert A.M. Stern never stopped believing that a rhythm of framed windows set into stone-clad walls gave deluxe residential towers their New Yorkiness and their claim to quality. His firm's recent limestone high-rise at [200 East 83rd Street](#) evokes the great Art Deco piles of yore. A decade or two ago, these choices read like special cases, imposed by circumstance or reactionary resistance; [now, they seem prescient.](#)



Morris Adjmi's new citizen of Little Italy. The domed protrusions act like pixels, creating a ghost pattern of windows on the façade. Photo: Justin Sullivan

One architect who was ready for a new trend was [Morris Adjmi](#), whose firm long ago developed an astute way of blending 19th-century warehouse architecture with contemporary aesthetics. "I don't know if I was ahead of the times or behind them, but if you do something long enough, it comes back around," he says. Grand Mulberry, Adjmi's six-story building at 185 Grand Street, is clothed in handmade, hand-laid bricks, some of which sport pairs of rounded bumps, like LEGO blocks. From a distance, the little domes act like pixels, forming a pattern of ghost windows that don't quite align with the actual ones, like traces of a vanished city that haunts its own replacement. The façade evokes memory, reminding passersby that, like every square foot of the city, the corner of Grand and Mulberry Streets is in a temporary state of being — that other buildings have stood and other New Yorkers have lived on this patch. (One, incidentally, was Nikola Tesla, who had a studio down the block.) It's a way for brand-new architecture to acknowledge the passage of time and to concede the possibility of its future demise.

The color, shape, and standard windows of Grand Mulberry mark it as an ordinary citizen of Little Italy. The rounded corner softens the turn, and those nubbled bricks echo the little bursts of gratuitous grandeur in a neighborhood of tenements and modest commercial structures. They're like the florid terra-cotta shields that adorn the spandrels of the arches at 176-180 Grand Street and imply a spurious aristocratic connection. Cheap buildings from the early 1900s indulged in a lot of those off-the-shelf flourishes, and I read them as statements of aspiration, an easy way to signal elevated intent.



From left: Left, KPF's glass-clad supertall One Vanderbilt. Right: the same firm's terra-cotta and-metal neo-Art Deco mixed-use building at 520 Fifth Avenue. Photo: Raimund Koch/Courtesy of KPF; Photo: Binyan Studios/Courtesy KPF.

Even Kohn Pedersen Fox has discovered the elegance of down-home solidity. These days, Von Klemperer says, “there’s a greater interest in and appreciation of craft and of humanistic architecture. We like to see how bricks are laid and wood is milled.” Coming from a global purveyor of icy supertalls, that’s almost a statement of remorse. KPF recently designed a ten-story apartment building at 64 University Place as a stack of shallow arches, each one deep enough to have substance — to give the illusion, that is, that the multilevel arcade is holding up something other than itself. The stepped setbacks, the recessed windows, the echeloned courses that form each arch — these techniques all make the surface less superficial, creating a buffer of shadows between window and street. It’s not much — Manhattan square footage is too expensive to sacrifice any to a deep-set façade — but it’s enough to remind the eye that a building is a durable three-dimensional object and not a levitating windowpane.

In modern buildings, bricks are no longer expected to carry any structural load, so they’re often cranked out in thin wafers, applied to a backing, and hung in large sheets that require clumsy joints. KPF isn’t above such expediency, but in this case, a temporary economic vagary made it cheaper to use bricks that were made by hand and laid, one by one, by a team of skilled Ecuadorians. The workmanship shows in the color and precision of the grout, the mottling of dark flecks, and the triangular pieces where the arches meet — details that give the façade a subliminal liveliness.



A close-up of 64 University Place’s arched windows. Photo: Meseret Haddis/Courtesy of KPF

At the turn of the 20th century, terra-cotta supplied Louis Sullivan’s [Bayard-Condict Building](#) on Bleecker Street and Cass Gilbert’s [Woolworth Tower](#) with Gothic frosting and filigree that gave massive structures their frothiness. These days, companies like [Boston Valley Terra Cotta](#) have developed technology to scan, copy, and reproduce eroded elements from those landmarks, making this a golden age of historic restoration. Casting is an expensive multistep process, though, and the same factories can furnish façades for new construction by the more straightforward technique of extrusion, yielding handsome but less ornate panels.

That’s what allowed SOM to [adorn Disney’s headquarters in green terra-cotta](#) and KPF to surprise even itself with a graceful and fresh but retro mixed-use tower at 520 Fifth Avenue, with offices below and apartments above. Once again, Von Klemperer’s team deployed stacked arches, rhythmic setbacks, rippling panels, and a range of textures that add up to a rare architectural quality: surface character.

It’s an encouraging sign when architects — and more important, the developers they work for — rediscover tools they should never have abandoned. The art of building is already too constricted to give up on shadows, texture, depth, color, organic imperfection, and the marks of time. Builders have relied on those fundamental qualities since they first started mounding dirt into huts, and no modern megalopolis can ever truly outgrow them.