

EDIFICE COMPLEX

BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

AN EMINENT ARCHITECTURE CRITIC PICKS THE TEN BEST NEW BUILDINGS IN MANHATTAN

For all that New York sees itself as a great center of art and culture, it has rarely been at the cutting edge of architecture. The city's other great preoccupation—money—has gotten in the way of its architectural ambitions, because it was often easier to think of buildings as assets rather than art. Not for nothing did glass office and white-brick apartment towers become the modern Manhattan métier. You could put them up fast and cram a lot of rentable space into them, and to real-estate developers that mattered a lot more than whether they gave you that special frisson.

But the marketplace, here as elsewhere, has begun to demand something more than banal boxes. Another part of New York culture—the belief that appearances matter—has infiltrated the world of real estate. The world's best architects have now begun, at last, to leave their mark on a cityscape that once seemed inclined to dismiss them as impractical artistes. That was never true, of course. They just wanted to make challenging buildings. Here are ten of the best that have gone up in Manhattan in recent years:

1| The Morgan Library. The first New York project of Renzo Piano, the Italian who has become the favorite museum architect in America, if not the world, the Morgan is technically an addition to Charles F. McKim's original of 1906, perhaps the greatest Renaissance palazzo in America. But it recasts McKim and the other Morgan complex buildings into an elegant and graceful new context—perhaps the most subtle attempt in New York to weave a modernist tapestry around older buildings.

2| Rose Center for Earth and Space, American Museum of Natural History. James Stewart Polshek's replacement for the aged Hayden Planetarium, this is a sphere inside a glass box, blown up to monumental scale. It manages to turn the French architect Étienne-Louis Boullée's imaginary visions from the 18th century into a viable building for a New York institution in the 21st century.

3| Perry Street apartment towers. Richard Meier, who has practiced here for forty years, was a prophet without honor in his own home city for a long time—the architect of the Getty in Los Angeles and museums around the world had built almost nothing of significance here. That changed with a pair of exquisite glass towers opposite the Hudson River in Greenwich Village, since expanded to three. Finally, New York condominiums in which elegance of detail matters more than cramming in the greatest number of apartments.

4| Hearst Building. Norman Foster, the British architect known for buildings of stunning sleekness, created the definitive modern skyscraper in the early nineties with his HSBC headquarters in Hong Kong. Foster finally came to New York at the invitation of the Hearst Corporation, which invited him to build a tower atop its fanciful, but unfinished, Joseph Urban-designed headquarters from the 1920s. Foster didn't copy anything except Urban's flamboyance, which he echoed in a powerful tower of glass and steel set in diagonals. The Hearst tower clearly emerges from rational thought, with a jauntiness that most modern buildings lack.

5| IAC Headquarters. Another case of an architect who was acclaimed throughout the world but couldn't bring his show to Broadway, this is Frank Gehry's New York debut. Gehry was invited by Barry Diller to design a headquarters for the InterActive Corporation, and it is at once a classic Gehry essay in swoops and curves, and a departure for the architect, since it is covered entirely in glass. And not just any glass, but a glass patterned with tiny white ceramic dots that give the façade a deliberately milky, almost hazy quality.



THE MORGAN LIBRARY
THE FIRST NEW YORK PROJECT
OF ARCHITECT RENZO PIANO

6| LVMH Headquarters. When Christian de Portzamparc, a French architect who won the Pritzker Prize but has built relatively little anywhere in the United States, was asked by the luxury goods conglomerate to produce a building to house Christian Dior and other LVMH divisions, he came up with a small tower of folded glass, a kind of origami on 57th Street. Among other things, it is a reminder of how rare the little skyscraper has come to be in New York.

7| South Court, New York Public Library. Everyone knows the library, of course, Carrere & Hastings's sumptuous Beaux-Arts monument to literacy from 1911. And most people know how magnificently the building has been restored over the last generation. But few are aware that the architects of the restoration, the New York firm of Davis Brody Bond, also produced a modernist gem within the library—the South Court building, a pristine glass tower that was quite literally constructed within one of the old building's courtyards.

8| Museum of Folk Art. Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, among New York's most thoughtful architects, had a difficult challenge: creating a small museum that would not be overwhelmed by the Museum of Modern Art, its next-door neighbor, which was doubling in size at the same time this town house-size museum was going up. Williams and Tsien produced a façade of huge steel plates, arranged in a careful composition of gentle angles, that has both remarkable dignity and strength and holds its own beside the big museum without appearing to try too hard.

9| Bloomberg Building/One Beacon Court. Huge skyscrapers that combine office buildings, stores and condominiums aren't anything new, and they usually aren't special. But Cesar Pelli has designed this one with unusual restraint and sophistication and more elegant details than most. The best thing: the great central courtyard, a scooped-out space whose glass walls slant inward like the sides of a cone.

10| Fifteen Central Park West. Everything new doesn't have to look new. Amid the potent resurgence of modernism in New York, Robert A. M. Stern has held his own as a maker of traditionally styled buildings. Here, he has produced a limestone-clad apartment tower that deftly pays homage to the classic architecture of New York City between the wars. It's bigger, of course, 21st-century economics being what they are. But if you believe they don't make them like they used to, here is proof that they do. **BG**