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Dark Tower: A Daring Design Over Madison Square

By JAMES GARDNER

Though few people, if any, have seen a single rendering, there is palpable excitement in New York's architectural circles over a 22-story tower designed by Rem Koolhaas for One Madison Park, on the southeast corner of Madison Square Park.

Given the buzz that has surrounded it in the press and on the Web, you would hardly know that another building in the same development is nearly completed and all of 50 stories tall. It is this tall, slender tower that has recently, and rather startlingly, altered the skyline of the Flatiron District. The design is by the local firm of Cetra/Ruddy, which certainly doesn't have the cachet of Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture.

But then, isn't that the nature of architecture in New York City? Unless some expensive name, preferably foreign, can be attached to a building's design, it doesn't quite exist. And so, while the 22-story project promises to be not only Architecture — note the majuscule — but a piece of art history itself, the taller development immediately to its west remains anonymous to most New Yorkers. This is a grave injustice, however. For the larger building, even in its state of partial completion, is surprisingly successful. If the Koolhaas project ends up looking this good, we will have much to be thankful for.

At 18 years old, Cetra/Ruddy is a relatively young firm whose principals, John Cetra, Nancy Ruddy, and Jeffrey Rosenberg, have been responsible, in recent years, for some noteworthy additions to New York City. Perhaps most prominently, they, with Cook + Fox, have designed the much maligned but still striking Ariel towers, on Broadway at 99th Street. They have also redesigned the Barbizon Hotel, created the permanent butterfly pavilion at the Bronx Zoo, and conceived the new Lincoln Square Synagogue, on Amsterdam Avenue at 69th Street.

As regards this firm's work at One Madison Park, however, New Yorkers of long standing will experience a reflexive and immediate response that goes something like this: How dare they? You will hear that this dark new tower completely ruins the scale of the area and the relation of the park to the surrounding structures, most notably the Metropolitan Life Tower just to its



SLENDER When the height of the new tower at One Madison Park is measured against its footprint, it may just offer the sveltest profile in the entire city. (Heuichul Kim)

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north, on Madison Avenue across 23rd Street, and that its drab Modernism is an eyesore among the generally pre-war buildings that it now profanes with its presence.

Let us consider the second claim first. By any ordinary criterion, this new building should indeed be a bore. It has neither the vernacular adornments of classical Postmodernism, nor the extravagant eccentricities of Deconstructivism. It is as foursquare and rectilinear as any mid-century office tower in Midtown, rising from a six-story cubic base that is of a piece with the rest of it. What makes the whole project special, however, especially in its architectural context, is its dimensions. Visually speaking, it is almost perilously tall and thin. Indeed, when the height of this building is measured against its footprint, it may just offer the sveltest profile in the entire city.

Except to the north, where it faces Madison Square Park, the new building confronts the world with a dark, uninflected façade consisting of square modules as terminally sullen as an Ad Reinhardt abstraction. And yet, for all that, the building is not sullen itself. Its giddy dimensions afford it a measure of delight. Then on the northern façade, its windows are collected into units or maniples of several stories in the form of extremely shallow cantilevers. We will have to wait until the project is completed to judge the ultimate success of this part of the design.

As regards the scale, however, the new building, even in a state of partial completion, is already exerting a largely beneficial influence on Madison Square Park and the Flatiron District. Heretofore, as you looked southeast from Fifth Avenue and 25th Street, your view was dominated for fully a century (since 1909, to be exact) by the Metropolitan Life Tower, once the tallest building in the world. Designed by Napoleon LeBrun and inspired by the Campanile of Saint Mark's in Venice, this building rose above its neighbors exactly as its Venetian counterpart continues to rise above the lower-lying roofs and spires of the Realtine Archipelago.

That effect is fine for Venice, and it seemed fine on 23rd Street. But now that this new building has gone up, it feels as though something had been missing from this patch of Manhattan for nearly 100 years. For the first time, the eye progresses from the Met Life Tower to the slightly lower One Madison Square, then glides past some low-lying structures before it comes to rest on the 22-story Flatiron Building. Whereas before you had two widely disconnected points, the Met Life and the Flatiron, now you have a gracefully linear and subtly swirling progression from northeast to southwest. For the first time, Madison Square Park no longer feels like a horizontal plane dominated by a single vertical spike. Rather, it is a park whose several surrounding structures embrace it without overpowering it.

Best of all, One Madison Park, like the Met Life Tower and the Flatiron Building in their day, succeeds in being more than simply an inhabitable structure: It is an event.

Indeed, this beanpole of a building is so thin as to revive in New Yorkers the amazement that our forebears felt when they saw the first skyscrapers, more than a century ago, and marveled that something so tall would not come crashing down upon them.



UNITING, NOT DIVIDING The new building, even in a state of partial completion, is already exerting a largely beneficial influence on Madison Square Park and the Flatiron District. (Heichul Kim)
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