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Luxury Superslims: Bane or Boon?

The recent prevalence of extra-thin and tall “superslim” towers in New York, which mostly contain luxury apartments, has been controversial. We felt it was time to air out the pros and cons, by asking, “Do we need to change the approach to building supertall towers in New York?”

NO

Michael Stern

Founder, JDS Development Group

Our great city has often been measured by its awe-inspiring skyline and must continually grow and improve, or otherwise risk the kind of stagnation that other cities suffer by resisting responsible new development. Large-scale and “superslim” development on the 57th Street corridor is not an accident; rather, it was in fact carefully considered by city planners when the current zoning was enacted. This grand boulevard in the heart of midtown Manhattan sits on some of the best sub-surface conditions for skyscraper construction in the world, with access to excellent transportation and other infrastructure. This is precisely where our most ambitious skyscrapers belong.

The go-to arguments about superslims — contextualism, shadows, and contempt for the wealthy — fall flat by ignoring the short-term and long term benefits of these buildings. Superslims maximize the use of our diminishing land resources and often preserve the low scale of surrounding buildings. In the case of our own superslim at 111 West 57th Street, the landmarked Steinway Hall will be preserved and meticulously restored as part of a carefully considered and responsible development program.

The “contextualism” argument seems rather misplaced when the context in Midtown Manhattan is other skyscrapers of varying heights. The complaint du jour is concern over shadow impact. In reality, superslims cast shadows that are narrower and move quicker than those cast by bulkier, shorter towers—a fact recognized by today’s city planners. Does anyone really want a wall of squat buildings of

roughly the same height, rather than the diversity of heights and building types that makes our skyline the gold standard of the world?

Finally, while nobody has empathy for luxury, we cannot ignore that the superslims have a positive economic impact by creating thousands of high-paying construction jobs and many permanent service jobs, and by generating permanent and recurring property tax revenue streams for the city to pay for essential services.

Every great civilization of the past had its distinctive architecture — just as the Greeks had the Parthenon, the modern supertall skyscraper embodies what defines New York—its ever-evolving skyline that provides endless inspiration for what might indeed be possible.

YES

Mary Rowe

Executive VP, Municipal Art Society of New York

From One57 to 432 Park, the recent crop of supertall towers in New York is the subject of much debate, but rarely does discussion address the true issue at hand: are we building our skyline in a way that is transparent, equitable, and intentional?

Those who call for a more intentional approach to supertall construction are often shouted down by those who say what has happened on 57th street is an aberration. But this is no fleeting trend: three more thousand-foot buildings are under construction on 57th Street. Super-towers are about to break ground near the Flatiron Building and Sutton Place.

What the Municipal Art Society dubbed “The Accidental Skyline” in 2013 grows more

haphazard each month. But don’t blame the developers; they’re following the rules. It’s the rules themselves that have suddenly become ineffective. We’re asking this: isn’t it time for the City to take concrete steps towards a more intentional zoning and permit process for these soon-to-be iconic structures? Here’s how the City might start:

- 1) Require all buildings above a certain height — say, 20 percent more than what the underlying zoning allows — to go through the City’s public review process, which is designed to measure the impact that a new development has on its immediate neighborhood and potentially negotiate appropriate civic investments and compensation if the new building casts shadows, or burdens our sidewalks, streets, and subways.
- 2) Require developers to notify authorities whenever zoning lot mergers occur — these private transactions have a very public impact and they should not be shrouded in secrecy.
- 3) Support city councilor Mark Levine’s bill to create a task force to study the impact of new construction around public parks, where shadows and other potential impacts are most controversial.

We have one of America’s most dynamic real estate development markets. All we are advocating for is a process that ensures comprehensive, thoughtful planning, community engagement, and public review. New York shouldn’t have to settle for an *Accidental Skyline*, but better, a *City by Design*.

