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## Raising the Standard

*New Balazs hotel adds colossal imprint to city*

By James Gardner

The defining architectural charm of New York City is the clamorous diversity of its buildings, which don't play very well together. But as the new Standard Hotel rises above the mostly low-lying structures of the Meatpacking District, at 848 Washington Street, its single-minded ambition seems to be to stomp them out of existence.

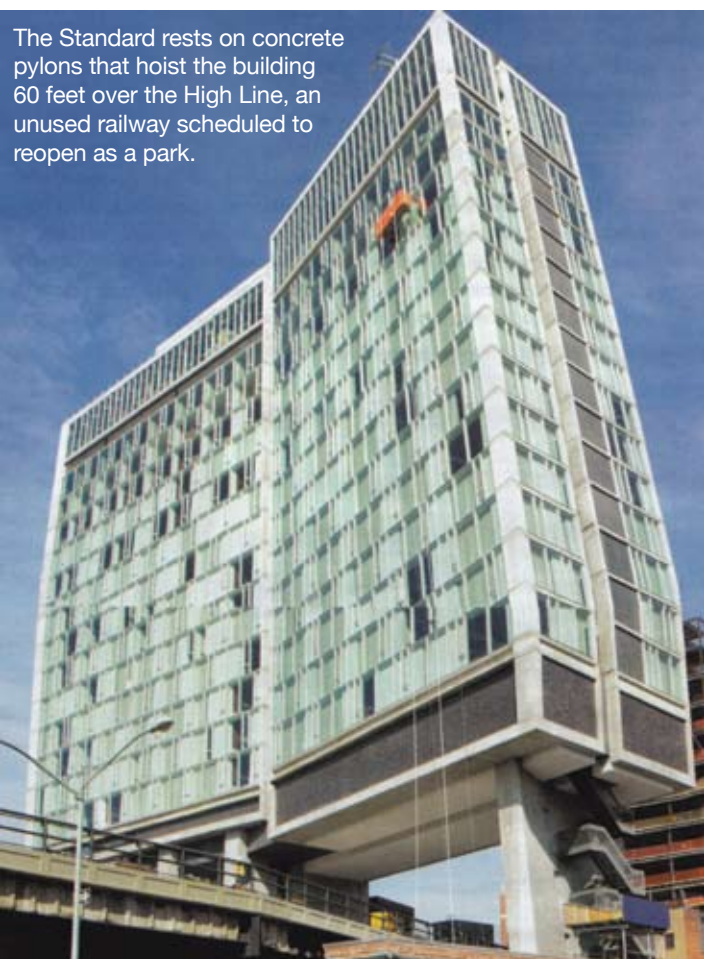
This Godzilla effect is enhanced by the most striking feature of the Standard, two concrete pylons that hoist the building up 60 feet over the High Line. The unused rail line, scheduled to open as a park later this year, runs under the bulk of the new building, as if racing mischievously between its legs.

Developed by hotelier André Balazs, impresario of the postmodern lifestyle, the Standard, at 20 stories and 265 feet tall, was designed by Todd Schliemann, the most gifted principal at Polshek Partnership Architects. How welcome it is that, after years of seeing his valiant efforts routinely attributed to his boss, James Polshek, Schli-

emann, together with other Polshek principals such as Susan Rodriguez and Richard Olcott, is finally getting his due.

What distinguishes Schliemann from the rest of his firm, and from most other architects working today, is a rare ability to conceive a building as a strikingly simple idea that is then skillfully elaborated upon without compromising the force of the initial concept.

The supreme example of this, and one of the most amazing architectural acts in North America, is the Rose Center for Earth and Space, which Schliemann designed for the American Museum of Natural History, at 81st Street between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Completed in 2000, it reads as a perfect sphere contained within an equally perfect cube that at night is aglow in lavender light. In the same spirit, the Weill Greenberg Center at York Avenue and 70th Street was designed as a single translucent sheet that rises up in gossamer insubstantiality, from the sidewalk to the summit of the building.



The Standard rests on concrete pylons that hoist the building 60 feet over the High Line, an unused railway scheduled to reopen as a park.

The fact that the Standard lies all the way to the west near the West Side Highway makes it seem like something halfway between architecture and infrastructure.



A similar conceptual simplicity is fully evident in Schliemann's latest building on 13th Street. One has only to see the building once, in all its colossal menace, and one will never forget it. But just as the Rose Center has a historicist subtext in its invocation of 18th-century French architects like Étienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, so too does the Standard Hotel channel the spirit of 1970s Brutalism. For this reason, despite its novelty, the overall look of the Standard is apt to seem oddly familiar to many New Yorkers.

It reads, surely intentionally, as a daring re-enactment of the sort of bare concrete massiveness that defined Brutalism and that marked it as the stale butt end of Modernism before the emergence of the more traditional Post-Modernism of the 1980s. Slightly mottled and discolored in parts, the Standard makes no attempt to conceal its bare, reinforced concrete. Structurally, as well, the building supports such an interpretation: The bulk of the hotel consists of two curtain-walled halves, slightly irreg-

ularly conjoined, that suggest such establishments as the former Americana Hotel, designed by Morris Lapidus at Seventh Avenue and 54th Street. And the fact that the Standard lies all the way to the west of Manhattan Island, near the West Side Highway, makes it seem like something halfway between architecture and infrastructure, an optical illusion that is also fully in harmony with contemporary taste. The imaginative leap supplied by its various subtexts transforms the new hotel from a bad 1970s building into a very fine structure for the new millennium.

Admittedly, it takes a practiced eye to see the difference. But the more one looks, the more one notices elements of refinement, of thought, in the detailing as well as in the overall conception. To begin with, the texture of the concrete is not the pedestrian sort common to classical Brutalism, but rather the poetic variety that distinguishes the work of Louis Kahn at his best. And then the glass skin is set into its concrete grid in such a way that it rises from floor

to ceiling to provide the sort of abundant natural light that architects of the 1970s rarely achieved or even wanted.

Only when one enters the rooms themselves, designed in a tastefully Minimalist idiom by Roman and Williams, does one appreciate the alchemical specialness of what Schliemann has pulled off. Because the new hotel rises in virtual isolation, the stunning openness of the varied vistas causes guests to feel in direct physical contact with New York City. Only because of that isolation, because of the distance between them and other buildings of their height, however, will guests be able to tolerate how nakedly exposed they are. As they stand in the shower, sit on the toilet or shift in their beds, nothing but a pane of glass separates them from the city outside and far below.

The magnificent views that greet each guest are far more than simply a question of looking out the window: They are an architectural achievement. Each window unfurls from within like a hyper-realist tableau set in a concrete frame. Each

bedroom and glass-walled bathroom has been angled to provide the most compelling views of the Hudson River, Lower Manhattan, Midtown and, above all else, the High Line that lies beneath.

But despite the intense realness of the experience, Schliemann and Balazs are weaving a mythic image of New York City, one whose center of charm and cultural consequence has shifted from Central Park and the Upper East and West sides, with their refined *Beaux Arts* sensibilities, to a more democratic and working-class aesthetic that revels in rusting train tracks and all the other tangles of rotting infrastructure that make up this part of Manhattan. The paradox, of course, is that their vision of New York is no more real than the one concocted by the architects of the Dakota, the San Remo and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In fact, it is a carefully constructed, and very expensive, vision of the city, one that exists more in the minds of international visitors than in any reality that would be recognized by the locals.