

Can Architects Create A New Neighborhood Of Skyscrapers In New York?

While thousands of New Yorkers struggle to rebuild in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, a much larger project is poised to begin construction on a new neighborhood from scratch on the city's west side. The Manhattan-based developer The Related Companies expects to break ground this month on Hudson Yards, the \$15 billion city-within-a-city built atop a platform over the eponymous rail yards. Cities built from scratch have been popping up in Asia, but what will happen to New York when it adds an entire new high-rise city into an already thriving metropolis?

We will soon find out. The mega-project reportedly received its first \$400 million of financing last month to cover phase one of what will eventually include 12 million square feet of offices, condos, hotels and retail enfolded into a quartet of towers—the tallest of which will rise higher than the Empire State Building. Picture Columbus Circle's Time Warner Center (another Related project) scaled up and re-conceived in Rockefeller Center's image.

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Hudson Yards may shock New Yorkers with its instant addition of a neighborhood the size of downtown Detroit to the north end of the Highline, but this is exactly what KPF—among legions of other western architects have been doing in Asia for years. "This isn't really a supertall," KPF co-founder Bill Pedersen said while glancing at a model of the project in his office; Manhattan's skyline has some catching-up to do. While Pedersen insists the plan for Hudson Yards "is pure New York," i.e. not a New York version of the Korean city New Songdo, the project bears unmistakable traces of the firm's decade-long building spree abroad.

The project's closest predecessor, for instance, might be Tokyo's Roppongi Hills—a similarly supersized live-work-play development that opened in 2003. Like Hudson Yards, Roppongi Hills was built largely at the insistence of one man, the late real estate tycoon Minoru Mori, who dedicated the Mori Tower's uppermost floors to an arts center and museum. And like Mori, Related's Ross has expressed a similar personal interest in making culture a centerpiece of the project, including both the "Culture Shed," a city-managed arts complex designed by Diller and Rockwell, and a public monument which so far only exists in Ross' head.

Of the two towers designed by KPF, one will host the headquarters of Coach (with an assist from creative director Reed Krakoff), while the taller will boast a cantilevered observation deck, hotel, and other amenities at the top reminiscent of the firm's work at the World Financial Center. Shanghai's tallest skyscraper contains a Park Hyatt (formerly the world's highest hotel) and an observation deck running the length of the "can opener," including vertiginous glass panels in the floor on which visitors are invited to jump. (They're several feet thick.)

Both towers at Hudson Yards will be clad in the shingled surface Pedersen first deployed at the International Commerce Center in Kowloon two years ago. "We felt it would give a lesser interior reflection, which it does to a certain degree," Pedersen said. "More important, it has remarkable ability to catch light in a way that no other glass building does."

The biggest challenge facing KPF—and especially landscape architect Thomas Woltz—is creating a functioning neighborhood with great public spaces (rather than barren, windswept plazas) that integrates seamlessly with the rest of the city. For that, Pedersen is looking closer to home. “Rockefeller Center still ranks as the finest assemblage of buildings of its type in the world,” he said. “And it does so because of the scale of its connections to the rest of the city. The old RCA Building still triumphs, but everything else is in scale to each other and to the city around. And I don’t think you find anything in Asia that has that.”

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