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POSTINGS

A Gallerist Turned Developer

By [FRED A. BERNSTEIN](#)

ON the southeast corner of Hester and Baxter Streets in Lower [Manhattan](#), a new building called 123 Baxter is marketing 21st-century amenities: refrigerators with Internet connections and an automated underground garage.

On the northwest corner, another condominium building, called the Grand Machinery Exchange, couldn't be more different. It has the kind of thick brick walls and cast-iron columns that hark back to the early 20th century.

Built in 1915 and used as a machinery warehouse until last year, the structure is being converted to 14 condos.

The developers include Max Protetch, who has been selling architectural renderings from his gallery for 30 years. Back in the 1980s, when architects like Zaha Hadid and [Rem Koolhaas](#) had yet to find clients for actual buildings, it was Mr. Protetch who helped them earn a living from their works on paper.

Since then, his gallery has moved from 57th Street to SoHo, and

then to Chelsea, and has added a large number of contemporary artists to its roster. Still, Mr. Protetch remains a mainstay of the architecture world, and his confidants include a number of winners of the Pritzker Architecture Prize.

So his partners in the downtown development, he said, expected him to come up with a list of superstar architects to renovate the building. Instead, he decided to go with a virtual unknown named Mark DuBois, who had designed a house in Santa Fe, N.M., for art-collecting friends of Mr. Protetch.

He loves Mr. DuBois's "sensitivity to space," Mr. Protetch said; also, the usual suspects, like Mr. Koolhaas and Ms. Hadid, "are too busy doing huge projects around the world."

Mr. Protetch said his foray into development began five years ago, when he separated from his wife. He began looking for a building near his gallery in Chelsea, thinking he might work on one floor and live on another. His business partner, Andreas Veith, a retired banker living in Germany, would have had a "crash pad" in the building, Mr. Protetch said.

But when he couldn't find a building he liked in the West 20s, he began looking farther downtown, eventually falling for the arched windows of 209 Hester Street, on the border of Chinatown. He brought in Mr. DuBois, a partner in Ohlhausen DuBois Architects, who added Ed Rawlings of Rawlings Architects to the design team.

“The challenge was to create new interiors that resonated with the great old architecture,” Mr. DuBois said.

He is doing that by leaving interior brick walls and cast-iron columns exposed, and installing new wood floors supported by 6-inch-thick yellow pine beams. Under [New York City](#)’s building code, timbers that size can remain exposed, because their susceptibility to fire is extremely low. The result, Mr. DuBois said, is “gorgeous, deeply coffered wood ceilings.”

Mr. Protetch compared the renovation with a “lot of things you see in Europe, where they retain the texture and integrity of the old space.” By contrast, “in many Manhattan buildings, even by well-known architects, the detailing is appalling,” he said.

Unappalling detailing isn’t cheap: when sales begin later this month, the apartments will cost \$1.6 million to \$5 million (with two duplexes, on the sixth and seventh floors, commanding the highest prices).

Mr. Protetch said he would live in the building “if I can afford it.” Meanwhile, the man who has sold architectural renderings for 30 years said the project had taught him that “a really great architect is someone who makes sure the quality gets built, not just drawn.”

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