

THE REAL DEAL

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NEW YORK REAL ESTATE NEWS

Vol. 8 No. 8 August 2010 \$3.00

ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

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New Midtown building borrows from neighbor

Deftly handled design of Gotham hotel on 46th Street evokes nearby cultural center

This is not a propitious climate in which to build hotels, and yet a mysterious sliver of a hotel has just arisen in Midtown, at 16 East 46th Street, between Fifth and Madison avenues. New information shows that it's scheduled to be a boutique, the Gotham, which contains 66 units in its 22 stories, while occupying a single lot no wider than the townhouse that once stood at this site.

According to the architect of the project, Damir Sehic of C3D Architecture, most of the furniture has been moved into the hotel and the restaurant on the first floor. Work on the hotel, developed by K+B Development (after Refik Radoncic and Jeffrey Bennett), may finish next month.

The name of the new hotel requires some explaining. It is intended to invoke the Gotham Book Mart of sacred memory, which occupied this site until it folded in 2007 (although it was resident-only for five years, after moving from 41 West 47th Street, where it had been for more than half a century). Previously, the location had been the home of H. P. Kraus, a rare-books store. In honor of this literary heritage, not only is the building called Gotham, but its restaurant has been designed, with bookshelves and leather armchairs, to resemble and revive the atmosphere of the bookstore.

I was eager to write about the building because it is manifestly based on one of the most daring structures to rise in New York in the past decade: the Austrian Cultural Forum tower at 11 East 52nd Street. The building was designed by Raimund Abraham and completed in 2002. It is one of the strangest buildings in Manhattan, and I have often wondered why this surly gray edifice, only a stone's throw from Fifth Avenue on one of Midtown's busiest streets, has attracted relatively little attention in the eight years since its completion.

The most obvious weirdness of the 52nd Street building is that it occupies the plot of a townhouse (which is exactly what was there before it was built), and yet it rises to the extraordinary height of 24 stories. The narrow footprint means that, once allowances are made for the elevator shaft, the stairs and the mechanical core, there is not much left to the building. And the famously irascible architect who designed it, formerly a professor at Cooper Union, made something of a mess of the interior, with rather graceless functional details throughout. All he cared about, it seems, was the exterior, which looks like an Easter Island totem figure (not the sort of

association one might expect to encounter in an Austrian cultural consulate). It rises up seven stories and then bends backward,

south, spooking its Midtown neighbors with its South Pacific associations.

Still, the façade, as a façade, turned out

architects of the 46th Street building have gotten around the elevator-and-mechanical-core necessity. The building, however, rises in a similarly steep, gunmetal gray setback to roughly the same height between Fifth and Madison avenues.

Though the new hotel does not supply the drama or the instantaneous strangeness of the earlier forum building, its façade is deftly handled. Presumably in conformity with its low-lying six- and seven-story neighbors, the building's façade up to the sixth floor is a fairly conservative affair, and none too distinguished in its rather generic use of glass and steel pressed into the equally generic right angles of Midtown, with paired French balconies in the center. A darker trim surrounds the interior of this lower section of the hotel.

The drama begins above the sixth floor, when what looks like a different building seems to arc upward for an additional 13 stories. This part of the façade is regimented, with a sequence of steel-clad cantilevered balconies against an equally pale metal cladding.

As for the interior, I have so far seen only photographs, but the arc of the façade appears to do interesting things to the volumes of the rooms. An image of the nearly completed restaurant, meanwhile, appears to possess a dark and somber elegance.

It turns out that Sehic and C3D Architecture have been quite busy recently in New York. They are approaching completion of a 10-story building at 949 Park Avenue, one lot wide, between 81st and 82nd streets, whose dimensions resemble those of Costas Kondylis's 985 Park, which was the newest structure on the avenue before this. Sehic is also completing two buildings in Harlem, on 123rd Street between Lenox Avenue and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. All three of these projects, as well as a few others around the city, express a cleanly modernist idiom that manages, as on 46th Street, to harmonize well with their very different surroundings.

Perhaps hotels do not need to be radical. In any case, the new Gotham is not. It is a composite of things we have seen before: the massing of the Austrian Cultural Forum and the varied vocabulary of modernism and the deconstructivist style. But it manages to combine these diverse strains into a successful whole, and for that, New Yorkers — used to far blander and less competent architectural fare — have reason to be happy. **no**



The new Gotham hotel on 46th Street (main image above) is not radical, but it's a skillful composite of existing styles. Insets: (Top) The building's architect, Damir Sehic. (Top, right) The Austrian Cultural Forum tower: Gotham hotel's doppelgänger? (Bottom, right) The Gotham Book Mart occupied the 46th Street site until 2007.

according to zoning requirements, in a steep setback all the way to the 24th floor. The gunmetal gray façade, with metal facings, turns its truculent countenance to the

rather better than I initially appreciated. And now this new hotel arises a few blocks south of the Austrian Cultural Forum. It remains to be seen with what success the