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The developer of 252 East 57th Street wanted the glass wall sheathing the toilet and shower to wear a privacy banner, a stripe of frosted (or fritted) glass, arranged just so.

Leaving Shame on a Lower Floor

With walls made of glass, the bathrooms in the penthouse apartments of new Manhattan towers leave little to the imagination. But only the birds will get an eyeful.

By PENELOPE GREEN

Among the many vertiginous renderings for the penthouse apartments at 432 Park Avenue, the nearly 1,400-foot-high Cuisenaire rod that topped off last month, is one of its master (or mistress) of the universe bathrooms, a glittering, reflective container of glass and marble. The image shows a huge egg-shaped tub planted before a 10-foot-square window, 90 or more stories up. All of Lower Manhattan is spread out like the view from someone's private plane.

Talk about power washing.

The dizzying aerial baths at 432 Park, while certainly the highest in the city, are not the only exposed throne rooms in New York. All across Manhattan, in glassy towers soon to be built or nearing completion, see-through chambers will flaunt their owners, naked, toweled or robed, like so many museum vitrines — although the audience for all this exposure is probably avian, not human.

It seems the former touchstones of bathroom luxury (Edwardian England, say, or ancient Rome) have been replaced by the glass cube of the Apple store on Fifth Avenue. In fact, Richard Dubrow, marketing director at Macklowe Properties, which built 432 and that Apple store, described the penthouse “wet rooms” (or shower rooms) in just those terms.

Everyone wants a window, said Vickey Barron, a broker at Douglas Elliman and director of sales at Walker Tower, a conversion of the old Verizon building on West 18th Street.

“But now it has to be... a Window.” She made air quotes around the word. “Now what most people wanted in their living rooms, they want in their bathrooms. They’ll say, ‘What? No View?’”

It was a rainy, dull afternoon, but the penthouse apartment with the \$47.5 million price tag (in contract, as of this week) that Ms. Barron was showing this reporter needed no artificial light. Walker Tower is just a few blocks north of a landmarked district, which meant the architect, Cetra/CRI Architecture PLLC, could expand the windows to nine and a half feet. In the master bathroom, a massive silvered Waterworks tub looked south, with unobstructed

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views of Lower Manhattan. This is not “Rear Window” territory; you won’t be seeing your neighbors from the 23rd floor, and they certainly won’t be seeing you. (Because of Walker Tower’s ceiling heights, Ms. Barron said, “the 23rd floor is more like the 30th.”) But you can see the Freedom Tower.

From the corner bathrooms at 215 Chrystie Street, Ian Schrager’s upcoming Lower East Side entry designed by Herzog & De Meuron and with interior architecture by the English minimalist John Pawson, you can see the Chrysler Building and the 59th Street Bridge, if you don’t pass out from vertigo. The 19-foot-long bathrooms of the full-floor apartments are placed at the building’s seamless glass corners. It was Mr. Pawson who designed the poured concrete tub that oversees that sheer 90-degree angle.

Just looking at the renderings, this reporter had to stifle the urge to duck.

“Ian’s approach is always, If there’s a view, there should be glass,” Mr. Pawson said. “It’s not about putting yourself on show, it’s about enjoying what’s outside. Any exhibitionism is an unfortunate by-product. I think what’s really nice is that at this level you’re creating a gathering space. You can congregate in the bathroom, you can even share the bath or bring a chair in.”

On a recent Thursday, there were seven people standing in the master bathroom of an apartment on the 20th floor of 737 Park, another Macklowe project that’s a new conversion of a 1940s building by Handel Architects. (The apartment, three bedrooms in 4,336 square feet, is listed for \$19.695 million.) At 21 by 11 feet, there was certainly room in the bathroom for a few more. Along two opposing walls, two toilets and two showers faced off behind glass walls. The by-now-familiar egg floated in the center of the room.

“Some people don’t mind showing a little, and some don’t mind showing a lot,” said Gary Handel, the principal



A silvered tub floats like an oversize cruise ship in a bathroom at Walker Tower on West 18th Street. Everyone wants “a Window,” said Vicky Barron, the apartment’s broker.

of Handel Architects. “They are totally comfortable in their bodies.”

His colleague, Malay Shah, added that the glass enclosures meant you can see the mosaic tile and marble that sheath the walls. The glass seems to evaporate, so the room is defined by its exterior walls, not its shower or toilet stalls. “It was about the clarity of the idea,” he said.

Nine of the building’s C-line apartments expressed an even clearer idea: a wall of glass with two toilets at either end and a shower in the middle, which raised many an eyebrow among brokers and their clients because the toilets face each other. Design clarity — and a well-lit room — suggests questions about how private we want to be in our private spaces.

Jill Roosevelt, a broker at Brown Harris Stevens who has been leading her clients through a few of the new, glassy offerings, said 737 in particular sparked conversations about habits of intimacy. “It’s about how much proximity do you want to your partner who is performing these tasks?” she said. “It doesn’t affect sales, but there is always a reaction, ranging from nonchalant to amusement. It depends on how comfortable you feel with your spouse or



At 737 Park Avenue last week, seven people fit comfortably in this bathroom, which is 21 feet long and has dueling commodes and showers behind glass walls. “It was about the clarity of the idea,” said one of its architects.

These glass doors are frosted, but some in other apartments were shown clear, with the toilets facing each other and a shower in between them. Buyers could choose to leave them as is, or veil them with a special film designed by Harry Macklowe, the developer. To date, three out of the nine new owners have chosen the clear option.

partner. My traditional couples will say, ‘We’ll frost the glass.’”

One couple — “this would be the amused couple,” Ms. Roosevelt said — pondered the dueling commodes of the C-line at 737 Park with interest. “Well, I guess we could watch each other read the newspaper,” the wife said finally.

Jim Stanton, president of the World Wide Group, the co-developer of 252 East 57th Street, the swoopy glass building that will rise to 65 stories in the next few years, wanted the glass walls that enclose the toilet and shower of the master bathrooms there to wear a privacy banner (a stripe of frosted glass). The depth of the frosting, or fritting, as it’s called, said Julia Hodgson, director of development for the World Wide Group, was carefully considered. “There was a lot of sitting and standing behind that glass to get the fritting level just right,” she said.

Privacy, of course, is not an absolute value, but a value that has changed over time and circumstances, as Winifred Gallagher, an author who has written about the behavioral and psychological science of place, pointed out.

“And like everything else, the rich can buy more of it,” she said. “In the city, privacy is about shielding yourself from all the stimuli. Most of us can’t drop the shield entirely even when we’re in our own homes, because the city is right outside. But if you’re high enough, you can waltz around pretending you’re in the garden of Versailles.”

Furthermore, Ms. Gallagher added, for many the bathroom can be the focus of a lot of anxiety. “You have the scale and there’s the magnifying mirror so you don’t

put your makeup on and look like a clown,” she said. “And imagine yourself striding around the bathrooms with all that glass. It puts the pressure on you to be thin and fit, which are also perks of the rich. If you’re thin and fit, why wouldn’t you have this jewel box to show yourself off in?”

Mr. Schrager batted away any cultural or psychological diagnoses. “Your thesis I don’t go along with,” he said. “At Chrystie Street, we put the bath by the window because I think it’s magical to take a bath and look out. I don’t think

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- Ian Schrager

there’s a paradigm shift in bathing habits. It’s about style and material. I don’t think there’s a social trend towards exhibitionism.”

But it is the case that hotels and nightclubs made by Mr. Schrager and others have stretched the boundaries of public versus private, what we’re at ease doing where, and in front of whom. Stephan Jaklitsch, a Manhattan architect, recalls using the bathroom at the Felix, a nightclub in the Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong. Designed by Philippe Starck, the celebrity latrinist, as *The New York Post* once

described him, its granite urinals are set against floor-to-ceiling windows. “It was like you were peeing on the city,” Mr. Jaklitsch recalled. “It was a very powerful feeling.”

And infamously, the nightclub bathrooms on the 18th floor of the Standard Hotel in the West Village were

“Because it’s Manhattan, not Birmingham it’s bigger, better, more.”

- Barbara Sallick

curtain-free for a few years, eliciting much false outrage — and publicity.

“This is the background,” said Mr. Jaklitsch, who recently designed a glass bathroom with no door for a couple in Brooklyn. “People want to import these experiences back to their homes. They are willing to experiment. For developers catering to a wealthy clientele, there’s a financial indulgence in that they’ve devoted so much space, they’re able to push the boundaries even more. It’s also a reaction to the stress of our contemporary lives. Bathrooms, even in the city, are getting larger and larger, and more and more luxurious.”

Barbara Sallick, a co-founder of Waterworks, the glistening bazaar whose jewel-like hardware and five-figure tubs like the ones at Walker Tower have become entrenched as totems of the good life, said recently that the American luxury bathroom has been growing for nearly two decades, both as an idea and in actual square footage. “Twenty years ago, we were just emerging from the puritanical era,” she said. “Because it’s Manhattan, not Birmingham, it’s bigger, better, more.”

To make the point about how much attitudes have changed about that space, Ms. Sallick shared her salary from 1978, when she started her company. It was \$58 a week, a quarter the price of a tub spout from the current Waterworks catalog. The silvered Candide French boat tub at Walker Tower, for example, sells for just over \$12,000.

Still, a tub in a glass box floating high above the urban landscape seemed like a curious choice to her. “With the bath against the window, there is great light during the day but this sense of coldness at night,” Ms. Sallick said. “Nothing to make you feel closed, warm and private. And there is the cityscape that is in itself sort of active, so how do you ratchet that down? All the glass and all the white is beautiful, and it’s hygienic, but it’s cold. It feels more like an operating room. I wonder if it’s for a younger, cooler, audience, someone in a hurry.”

Ms. Gallagher was fascinated by the double toilets facing each other in their glass boxes. “I guess I’m hopelessly bourgeois,” she said. “I would rather be alone. It was the rich that were able to separate the toilet” — what Mr. Jaklitsch calls “the third rail” of bathroom design — “in another room. It’s interesting to me now if you’re



(Top) Ian Schrager’s 215 Chrystie Street, designed by Herzog & De Meuron and with interior architecture by John Pawson, will have 19-foot-long bathrooms set on the building’s seamless glass corners. (Bottom) The master, or mistress, of the universe bathrooms at 432 Park Avenue will be 90 or more stories high.

really rich, you’re rich enough not to have privacy in the bathroom.” (She invoked the habits of Louis XIV and Lyndon B. Johnson as a wincing referent.)

Back at 737 Park, buyers were offered a choice of keeping their glass vitrines clear, or frosting them with a 3M film designed by Harry Macklowe himself, said Hilary Landis, a head of sales for the building. Of the nine C-line apartments — the ones with the commodes facing each other — only three new owners chose the clear option.