

# The Covetables

Yes, we'd all like to live in the Dakota. Or 740 Park, the Beresford, or 15 CPW. In addition to those old standbys of lust-worthiness, the city is brimming with slightly less bold-faced but equally desirable buildings—that are just as impossible to penetrate. Here, a peek inside the Red Hook rental with a 40-person wait list, the Fifth Avenue co-op straight out of an Edith Wharton novel, and the \$525-a-month Chelsea studio.

By [S.Jhoanna Robledo](#) Published Dec 15, 2013



(Photo: © Patti McConville/Alamy)

## The Perfectly Quaint Mews: Sniffen Court

Back in the 1800s, the city's mews houses were used as shelter for carriages and the pungent animals that pulled them. In the early twentieth century, these carriage houses were either demolished or restored as quaint, picturesque

cobblestoned alleys. Of these, Sniffen Court, a charming nook with only ten houses off East 36th Street that were intended as stables for affluent families in nearby mansions, is one of the most Currier & Ives-esque. Built by three developers (none of them, incidentally, John Sniffen, to whom it supposedly owes its Seussian name), the street is beloved because of its petiteness—the better to take in its charms in one fell swoop, says Andrew Dolkart, director of the historic-preservation program at Columbia University—and, according to a Landmarks Preservation Commission report, it boasts “well-preserved original buildings whose exteriors are altered only in minor details.” Very few houses have changed hands over the years, though TV host Graham Norton reportedly bought one in 2003 for \$3 million. Another sold in 2008 for \$4.75 million.

*Other quaint mews: Grace Court Alley, Washington Mews, Warren Place Mews, Patchin Place.*



Illustration by Jason Lee

## The Affordable Chelsea Apartment: Penn South on Eighth Avenue

A limited-equity co-op similar to Mitchell-Lama buildings, which were built to provide inexpensive housing for middle-income earners, Penn South (official name: Mutual Redevelopment Houses, Inc.) is that rare bird—affordable housing that doesn't sacrifice location. Its

apartments go for \$23,300 a room, meaning a two-bedroom would cost a buyer roughly \$105,000 (the kitchen and the living room are part of the room count). Unsurprisingly, the wait is interminable, with 5,400 would-be residents on a list (that's incidentally closed), and a delay of about seventeen years. But unlike some Mitchell-Lama buildings, Penn South remains a beacon of affordability for the foreseeable future. Its tenants voted in 2011 to continue as an income-restricted co-op until 2030.

*See also: Cadman Towers.*



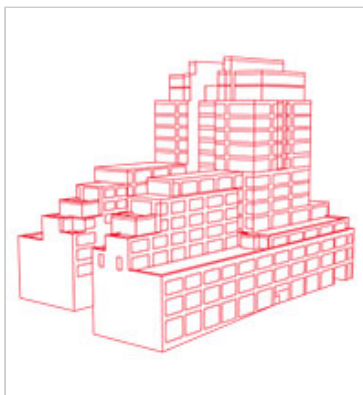
(Photo: S.Jhoanna Robledo)

**The Mysterious Mansion:  
24 Evans Street, Vinegar Hill**

A knoll behind a cluster of housing projects next to some Con-Ed utility buildings may not seem the most likely setting for a palatial estate. But in Vinegar Hill down a winding driveway stands the Commandant's House, a Federal-style mansion built

in the 1800s that's been luring urban explorers for years to its imposing gates. (Even its architect remains a puzzle; some say it's Charles Bulfinch, who designed the U.S. Capitol.) Until the Navy departed in 1966, it was home base to the Brooklyn Navy Yard's chief officer, hence the name. (Public records name a Rockefeller University scientist as the current owner.) Given its elusiveness, we have to rely on freeze-framed clips of HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*, which set Nucky Thompson's gracious home within its confines, for a peek inside. There's an oval dining room, tall windows with thick, wooden sashes, and coffered ceilings everywhere.

*Other mysterious mansions: 58 Joralemon Street, 200 Lafayette Avenue, 351 Riverside Drive.*



*Illustration by Jason Lee*

**The Fastest-Selling New  
Development:  
150 Charles Street**

Even in this inventory-starved market where buyers are once again eager to purchase apartments off floor plans, 150 Charles Street, currently under construction, stands out. Though neighbors have protested its arrival, with some even filing lawsuits, its 91 apartments, designed by Cookfox

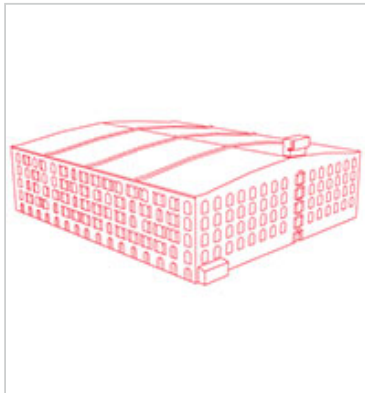
Architects, went like a condo circa 2005. Back in May, it sold out \$750 million worth of real estate three months after sales began, says Douglas Elliman's Leonard Steinberg, who helped market the building. (Half a billion sold in the

first six weeks.) The project, overseen by the Witkott Group, features an old-seeming brick, granite, and glass façade; individualized floor plans (80 different kinds); and practical amenities like a 3,000-square-foot gym, a porte cochere, and 30,000 square feet of public and private outdoor space.

*See also: 56 Leonard Street.*



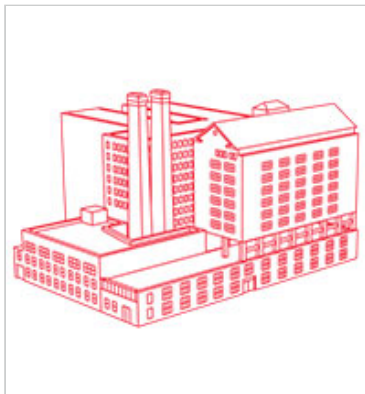
(Photo: Courtesy of the brokers)



*Illustrations by Jason Lee*

the exquisite lofts with thirteen-foot ceilings, arched windows framing Statue of Liberty views, and weighty beams that antedate the Civil War.

*Other wait-list rentals: the Verdesian and the Solaire.*



### **The Wait-List Rental:**

#### **275 Conover Street, Red Hook**

Despite its Zone A location in Red Hook, this converted warehouse has a surprisingly ardent following. Prices defy neighborhood norms—a one-bedroom was recently asking a whopping \$4,400 a month. About 40 people are on its waiting list, and previous takers have been known to get into bidding wars, says David Maundrell of [AptsandLofts.com](http://AptsandLofts.com). Though grocery shoppers crowd the ground-floor tenant, Fairway, the building's distance from the city's hustle and bustle may actually draw some of its famous tenants (Michelle Williams and Jason Segel reportedly shackled up here). That, and the

### **The Artists Colony:**

#### **Westbeth, 55 Bethune Street**

The waiting list has been closed for years at this iconic West Village behemoth, which was converted into an affordable artists commune by Richard Meier in the late sixties. Decades later, it still serves that purpose. Rents aren't just affordable—anywhere from \$800 for a studio

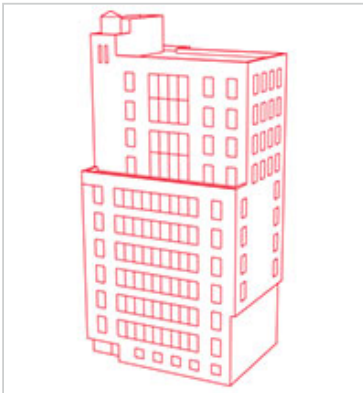
to \$1,800 for a three-bedroom—but also stabilized. Those artists lucky enough to make it off the waiting list must still meet with the admissions committee, says George Cominskie, president of the Westbeth Artists Residents Council. They also can't earn more than 90 percent of the median income of the area—\$56,000 a year, at last count. Lucky dwellers get airy apartments with big windows (some

with river views), a supportive community of artists to kibitz with—poet Hugh Seidman and filmmaker Edith Stephen still live here, and Martha Graham’s studios continue to call it home—plus a ground-floor gallery to show off their work.

*See also: Manhattan Plaza.*



(Photo: Courtesy of the brokers)



*Illustrations by Jason Lee*

elegant open floors,” says Corcoran’s Meris Blumstein, with brokers and buyers alike watching it for openings. But residents there—actor Joel Grey reportedly one of them—appear happy to stay put; none has placed an apartment on the market since 2004. And why would they? It’s not easy to find that much square footage in the prime Village, and harder still in a market where prices are so high that what sold at \$2 million back then can likely command three times that.

*Other low-turnover condos: 132 Perry Street, 140 Perry Street.*



### **The Low-Turnover Condo: 495 West Street**

In 1999, architect-developer Cary Tamarkin blazed a trail of sorts with 495 West, where lofts with generous floor plans (as much as 4,700 square feet in some units) and sixteen-foot-high casement windows sold surprisingly quickly, raw and unfinished, in what was then a relatively industrial slice of the far West Village. The condo conversion was among the first wave of luxury residential development along the waterfront, and apartment hunters were eager to buy into his vision. Nearly fifteen years later, the building’s still sought after, thanks in part to its “incredible views and very

### **The 80/20 Building: 500 West 30th Street**

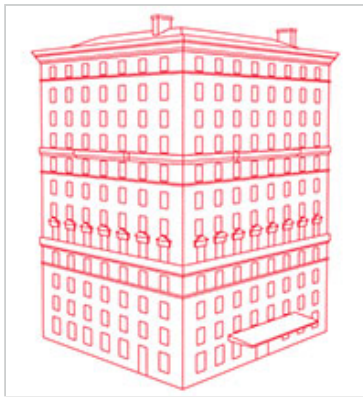
Living in a Robert A.M. Stern building isn’t just for the one percent. This 33-story brick-clad rental building now rising has 78 units (20 percent of the total) set aside for those earning no more than \$19,920 to \$42,950 a year. (In these 80/20 cases, developers gain access to tax-exempt financing bonds in exchange for offering low-cost units.) Rents are

expected to run from \$525 for a studio to \$873 for a two-bedroom. (No word yet on what market-rate tenants will pay.) In addition to its prime location—next to the third phase of the High Line—the building is loaded with perks: a sun deck, a fitness center, and 24-hour doormen, all of which lower-income tenants can take advantage of (unlike those who were famously blocked from using the amenities at Northside Piers in Williamsburg). Alas: The lottery’s over, and tenant selection is under way.

*See also: 525 West 28th Street, 282 Eleventh Avenue.*



(Photo: Courtesy of the broker)



*Illustrations by Jason Lee*

kind in America” in the early 1900s by *Architecture* magazine. Murry Guggenheim, Jack Astor, and Ann Slater, who’ve all lived here, appear to have agreed. Inside, the apartments are as marvelous as one would expect, with long entrance galleries, sweeping staircases, dentil moldings, stained-glass windows, and etched ceilings.

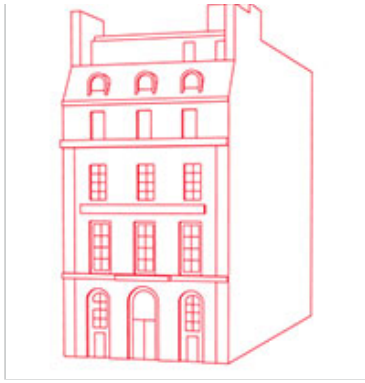
*Other architectural wonders: 165 Charles Street, 100 Eleventh Avenue, 40 Bond Street, 40 Mercer Street.*

### **The Architectural Wonder: 998 Fifth Avenue**

The stately building was conceived more than a hundred years ago as a lavish palazzo by the storied firm McKim, Mead & White, which was charged with convincing the well-to-do at the time that high-rises could be desirable. This limestone beauty still sets architectural historians’ hearts aflutter. “998 Fifth embodies the aspiration to make New York a great and grand city on a par with any European capital,” says New York’s architecture critic, Justin Davidson. “It’s like three Florentine palazzos stacked on top of each other.” No surprise that the building was dubbed “the most remarkable thing of its

### **The Manhattan Mansion: 9 East 71st Street**

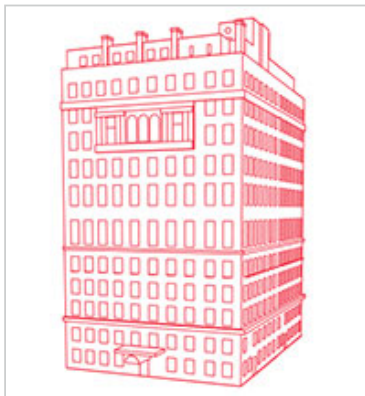
This single-family mansion has a rare 48 feet of frontage and a gorgeous limestone façade. (The sidewalk’s reportedly heated, so its owners aren’t inconvenienced by ice.) Plus, it has an interesting lineage: It was built



by Herbert Straus, an heir to K.H. Macy & Co.; owned by the Archbishop of New York, who deployed it as a satellite hospital; served as the Birch Wathen School; and housed billionaire Leslie Wexner and controversial financier Jeffrey Epstein, who may still live there. (He was just spotted taking a stroll around the hood with his around-the-corner

neighbor Woody Allen). With the low-lying Frick across the street, inhabitants enjoy views of the park even if they're not right on Fifth—Jed Garfield, president of Leslie J. Garfield, a firm specializing in townhouses, says many mansion owners wouldn't want the traffic on the avenue, anyway.

*See also: the Duke Semans Mansion, 11–13 East 62nd Street.*



### **The Impenetrable Co-op: 960 Fifth Avenue**

This building, designed by famed architect Rosario Candela, may not have an entire book chronicling its selectivity—ahem, 740 Park—but it's equally difficult to get into. It's blessed with massive apartments—only nineteen over fifteen floors—gilded with grand ballrooms and

coffered ceilings and direct views of Central Park, says Kirk Henckels, vice-chairman of Stribling Private Brokerage. It has perks few can claim, such as a dining room serving chef-catered haute cuisine to its residents. Toys 'R' Us founder Charles Lazarus just sold his duplex there for \$21 million, and while smaller apartments in its sister building next door, 3 East 77th Street, fetch a little less, stringent board requirements still apply. A broker told the New York Observer in 2006 of potential buyers who were turned away because they “were not board-qualified, socially.”

*See also: 820 Fifth Avenue, 834 Fifth Avenue, 778 Park Avenue.*