

SURREAL ESTATE

## The Box Builder

Peering down from a penthouse on the High Line.

by Brendan O'Connor · April 23, 2015



There are three penthouses in architect and developer Cary Tamarkin's newest West Chelsea building, on West 24th Street. Penthouse North is already under

contract. All of the other units in the building have been sold as well, and the ground floor retail space—sold to an investor—has been leased. Tamarkin's buildings, with their boxy, post-industrial outlines, are scattered across the West Village and Chelsea, where many less graceful imitations have sprung up as well. Tamarkin "is widely credited with having reintroduced the fashion for raw-space loft development in New York," the Times wrote in 2001.

### 508 West 24th Street, Penthouse South

- \$9,250,000; common charges: \$4,246; taxes: \$2,041
- 3 bedroom; 3.5 bathrooms
- Interior: 3,018 square feet; exterior: 600 square feet

On Tuesday, listing agents at 508 West 24th Street were holding an open house for brokers to see the two remaining penthouse apartments. One visitor had apparently been involved in a landmarking dispute with Tamarkin on the Upper East Side in the early aughts. Tamarkin's initial proposal had called for a seventeen-story condominium building; the building plan that passed, two years later, was nine stories. "Tell her I hate her," Tamarkin scoffed.

Tamarkin, who is from Long Island, studied architecture at Harvard and led his own firm, in Boston, for ten years, before moving back to New York in the early nineties to become a developer. "My whole life I had identified as an architect. That's what I did since age twelve," Tamarkin told me. "But I wasn't prepared to be a starving artist my whole life." In 1992, when he was thirty-five, he invested with a friend who, conveniently, had just gotten a job running the real estate fund at Oaktree Capital, in an abandoned warehouse in the West Village. A building at 140 Perry Street, which had been vacant for five years, Tamarkin said, cost 1.6 million dollars. "Even if the building made no money, I'd make twice as much money as if I'd just been hired as an architect, because I was also getting development fees," he said. "In fact, the building sold out, and I made a million dollars. I had never seen a million dollars. So, this was definitely the right idea."

Tamarkin's first building in West Chelsea was 456 West 19th Street. "At that time, this neighborhood was scary to walk in at night," he said. (That was in 2008.) "The High Line is this kind of museum of architecture. There's everybody and all types, all different famous names in architecture, and all different architecture. Everybody's got their own take on it."

This is not necessarily a good thing, as far as Tamarkin is concerned. "We don't like to scream for attention in my firm. We like to do things well, and get attention. If everybody's yelling, you can't hear anybody. I just wanted a powerful, muscular building."



508 West 24th Street, directly adjacent to the High Line, is made out of concrete—a first for Tamarkin. This gives it a very different look than most new constructions, which are heavily reliant on glass and stainless steel. “It’s not following current trends, I’ll tell you that much,” Tamarkin said. He nodded across the street. “HL-23 is one of these buildings that is super, uh, interesting. Flow-y, dancing, whatever it does. It’s totally not my thing,” he said. “I wanted it to be like a rock. As close to a rock as it could be.”

Out on the six-hundred square-foot Penthouse South balcony, Tamarkin noted another architect copying his signature look—banded, industrial windows. (Tamarkin admitted the influence of the hulking Starret Lehigh Building, visible from the balcony to the north west, on his own aesthetic. “It’s like a skyscraper laid on its side.”) “When I look back on my body of work, I didn’t set out to have a signature style. But if you’re an architect who’s thinking about what you’re doing, there’s going to be similarities between the buildings,” he said, before pointing to another building. “There you can see Robert Stern copying our windows. These windows are starting to show up all over the place. So I need a new idea.” And, in fact, he has one. “Clocks. I’m gonna put a clock on every building.”



It is unusual for a developer to design his own buildings, a fact of which Tamarkin is well aware. “We’re architects as well as developers, so we play both roles.” (“People hate

**508 West 24th Street, Penthouse A**

- \$12,500,00; *common charges*: \$5,160; *taxes*: \$2,480
- 3 bedroom; 3.5 bathrooms
- *Interior*: 3,318 square feet; *exterior*: 1,900 square feet

developers and they love architects, so they don’t know what to do with me,” he likes to say.) “There are very few people who do that. There’s no role model to follow, so it’s very confusing. But it ended up being fantastic! They don’t teach you in school that that’s an option—although now schools are asking me to come and talk to their real estate programs. But it’s such a different thing. You have to be really into business, and yelling a lot. It’s the opposite of architecture, which is very quiet.”

As an architect, Tamarkin likes to be able to visit his building sites with ease—which limits his options as a developer. “The architect part of me wants to be really close to the building site so I can go all the time and make sure it’s being done right. So that gets harder to do in Brooklyn. Even uptown, it gets harder to do.” (Tamarkin is currently renovating an old Catholic school on the Upper West Side.) “It’s a pain in the ass. I like to be within a few blocks of the office.”

“You also have to know the neighborhood,” he said. “When I’m working in the West Village, Chelsea, the client is me. So I feel like I know what to do. If you build somewhere else, even in New York—the Upper East or Upper West Side—you’ve gotta really familiarize yourself with all the competition, what people are building, what people want. It’s a whole different community.”

As for Brooklyn, Tamarkin said, “I look at stuff occasionally there, but I think I’m jaded by New York.” (By “New York” he meant “Manhattan.”) “Everything I see, in Williamsburg, in Greenpoint—it’s horrible. And you can sell for half as much as New York, so you have to build cheap to make money there.” He continued, “Given the opportunity to make money and build something shitty, it’s not interesting to me. Given the opportunity to build something beautiful and not make money—that’s not interesting to me either. It’s gotta be both.”

“I can’t imagine that there’s not a way to take those materials and make something substantial and beautiful, and I welcome that challenge. For real.” Hmm. For real, for real? “I go look at stuff! I’m not not up for it. I just haven’t done it. This is a realm that I’ve designed in for my entire life, for wealthy, expensive people that want to do good stuff.”

“In terms of affordable housing, I believe in it all, it sounds—and is—great, it’s just not the stratosphere that I operate in,” he said. “I only really know how to do expensive buildings.” And yet, he added, “It’s not that I don’t believe in the stuff politically...I would like to take up the challenge.”

“I don’t necessarily want to do the same thing my entire life,” he said. “Although, maybe I will.”