

CO.DESIGN

N.Y.C's Biggest Brutalist Eyesore Gets a Glassy Second Life

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“We used to call it the ‘elephant foot,’” says Sabrina L. Kanner, executive vice president of design and construction at Brookfield Properties, of 5 Manhattan West. The hulking, 16-story, 1,500,000-square-foot, cast-in-place concrete structure routinely received nods as one of the ugliest in Manhattan.

Originally designed as a warehouse by the architecture firm Davis Brody in 1970, the structure was clad in brown panels and painted a murky taupe in the 1980s, a decision that detracted from its appearance. In 2012, Brookfield acquired the property and set out to overhaul the structure for the demands of today’s businesses. Now, 5 Manhattan West has been completely remade: REX essentially flayed the structure by removing the entire facade, then wrapped it in a pleated glass skin.

While the building wasn’t a looker pre-renovation, it was a rarity in Manhattan real estate because of its extremely large footprint—some floors are as large as two football fields—and high ceilings. But it also had problems: the facade allowed virtually no natural light into the interiors, some floors had no views since the windows were above eye level in some cases, there were insufficient elevators, and the lobby was cramped (the building wasn’t designed to accommodate large volumes of people, despite its leviathan size). Additionally, the structure tapers as it rises, which posed a spatial challenge. The sloping facade created unused floor space and a safety hazard since people could hit their heads—known as “head strike” in building code parlance—on the ceiling.

“The sloped facades were part of its image—for better or worse,” says REX founder Joshua Prince-Ramus. “So it was a happy confluence of things where we could solve energy and solve head strike [in a way] that took the natural condition of the building and made it a new identity.”

The transformation of 5 Manhattan West from an eyesore into an amenity-filled development through renovation (Brookfield is also adding outdoor space and retail, and Whole Foods is one of the anchor tenants) is emblematic of responsible architecture, Prince-Ramus argues. He believes that adaptive reuse is the future of the industry, considering the environmental challenges the world is facing, like rising carbon emissions and energy consumption. Recycling a building is more resource effective than building one from the ground up, and making existing buildings more energy efficient is a must.

“Energy performance is in the design world’s orbit,” Prince-Ramus says, pointing out that buildings account for one-third of all energy consumption in the United States. “We really need to look at these things that reduce deforestation and reduce carbon emissions and transportation. With that in mind, it’s our obligation to adaptively reuse existing structures, be they Brutalist or something else, in an urban center. I think that’s going to slowly become the world of architecture in our lifetime and certainly in the next generation’s. We simply have to see adaptive reuse as ‘Capital-A’ architecture.”

5 Manhattan West isn’t the only Brutalist structure in the city that’s undergoing a substantial repositioning. The 32-story Verizon Building on the city’s east side is also getting a new glass facade. How to cope with Brutalist buildings is a flashpoint in the architecture world, with some people

arguing that these imposing structures should be demolished and others insisting that they should be preserved, especially since their concrete exteriors break up the monotony of glass that's become the norm for new builds. REX's renovation shows a different avenue for turning Brutalist buildings into something more palatable for developers and the high-rent tenants they want to attract—through thoughtful engineering.

“Clients want glass—they want as much transparency as possible,” Kanner says. “The daylight, the connection to outside, the connection to the environment—it feels better. From inside, the glass is superior to masonry, and that's what's driving it more than what we see when we drive down the West Side Highway. It's how people use and want to use a building.”

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