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## A Neighborhood's Three-Way Switch

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**T**HE newest skyscraper in Midtown, now under construction, makes a change from its all-glass, mostly office neighborhood. It's a residential condominium-hotel combination in a solidly commercial district; its design is an oddball mix of concrete and glass in a neighborhood where tinted monoliths have been common since the 1950s. Also, its condo units have been designed to mix and match.

The 48-story project, called Cassa, is at 70 West 45th Street. Conceived from the get-go as both home and hostelry, the building will give over its first 27 floors to a 166-Desires hotel and floors 28 through 47 to condos. Plans for the 48th floor are incomplete, but it will probably house a solarium.

The building was designed by TEN Arquitectos, the Mexico City firm headed by Enrique Norten, and the local firm Cetra/Ruddy. The developer is Assa Properties, which bought the lots for the project in 2007 for around \$410 million.

In this ostensibly cold market, Solly Assa, the owner of Assa, says the building is finding affluent buyers who want to create enormous homes. Mr. Assa said he had sold 17 of 57 units at an average price of \$2,000 per square foot. Five or six buyers, he said, bought more than one unit, with intentions to combine them; one bought four and two bought three each. Costs for the building, he said, are running in line with its \$90 million

construction budget.

Mr. Assa expresses confidence that the remaining units will sell at their asking prices before the opening next summer. He says Assa is negotiating with "a very big buyer from France" for a two-bedroom. "We don't have the pressure to sell that other buildings have," he said. "It's not like I have to sell 25 units looking at a wall."

According to Mr. Norten, wealthy buyers' penchant for combining or dividing layouts drove his design strategy. "People were going to start combining apartments or dividing them, creating a random condition within the building," he said.

So the concrete exterior, with wider and skinnier windows along its facades, anticipated the duplexes and triplexes that Mr. Assa says he is selling.

"We could predict the most logical ways that people were going to put together certain apartments," Mr. Norten said. "So we knew, for instance, that kitchens were not going to be where the kitchens were in the plan."

While the facade celebrates the liberty that allows buyers to alter a floor plan to create a large apartment, it also strikes a rebellious note in Midtown.

"We felt like we were going to make a huge statement with something that's going to stand out," Mr. Assa said. "I don't want another office building."

Which explains the investment in a buzz-seeking



### WINDOW PATCHWORK

A rendering of Cassa shows windows irregularly set, to facilitate combining various apartments.

exterior. Mr. Norten said the architects considered a metallic screen and a bricklike masonry skin before settling on the concrete. "We wanted to find our own personality in the neighborhood, which is not easy when you have such a variety of conditions," he said.

Along with space — the largest apartment, asking price \$15 million, contains roughly 3,400 square feet — residents can buy pampering. Desires, which made its name in Miami and which operates boutique hotels in New York at Times Square and Madison Square, will provide condo owners with all its hotel amenities, including room service and housekeeping.

"That's a big sell," Mr. Assa said. "When you come back from a trip, the place is filled with food and it's clean."

Mr. Assa says that the base of the building will showcase art as part of the streetscape, beneath the setback that will mark the start of the upper floors. The hotel's common areas, including a restaurant and an eighth-floor terrace and lounge, will be above the lobby.

The lower condo floors cannot advertise the views of the upper stories, but Mr. Assa says he believes the amenities will make up for that. And some of the condos run as small as 600 square feet. Mr. Assa invites buyers to combine those units as well.

"We're flexible on that," he said.