

Midtown skyscrapers hightail projects despite complications

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East Midtown rezoning? One developer couldn't wait for it. The result is that two state-of-the-art office towers already under way will beat any other new projects to the punch.

As developers pore over the city's 91-page Greater East Midtown Rezoning proposal, two projects devised under antiquated rules, yet tailored for 21st Century tenants, are racing toward completion.

L&L Holding Co. is pressing ahead with work on 390 Madison Ave. and 425 Park Ave. — which are to be all-new office towers constructed on the bones of obsolescent old ones. They will be open years before any new towers that may rise under the new zoning can be ready for use.

L&L, headed by David W. Levinson and Robert Lapidus, found creative ways to reinvent the old structures while adhering to the letter of zoning rules mostly written in 1961. They required, among other things, retaining at least 25 percent of a building's structural steel — a rule so constraining that it discouraged other developers from even trying.

Yet, 390 Madison (850,000 square feet) and 425 Park (670,000 sq. ft.) are well on their way toward their completion target dates — late 2017 and late 2018, respectively.

It isn't easy.

"I can't emphasize how complicated they are," Levinson said. "They're extremely complicated construction and engineering feats."



Rendering of interior of 425 Park Ave.

He added, “I think the new zoning, if and when it becomes law, will eliminate the need for this sort of thing.” The rezoning proposal, which would allow up to 30 percent greater density than currently permitted in a vast, 78-block swath of Midtown, will now begin the city’s 6-month Uniform Land Use Review process, which ultimately requires approval by the City Council and the mayor.

If the rezoning is approved as expected, it still might not take effect for a year from today. “My guess is that we’ll be substantially leased [at the two projects]” by the time the rezoning takes effect, Levinson said.

Both 390 Madison and 425 Park seem poised to catch the wave of companies that would rather remain in East Midtown, but are frustrated by the near non-existence of state-of-the-art space. Most buildings in the district are 50 or more years old. Those put up more recently lag far behind today’s structures which have greater floor-to-ceiling heights and advanced technological, environmental and security features.

Levinson said rezoning is necessary because, “Tenants want 21st Century facilities and they’re willing to go to different parts of the city.” In fact, although Midtown is far from a disaster area, many marquee tenants have left or will soon leave for brand-new towers in Hudson Yards, Manhattan West and the World Trade Center.

L&L’s strategy for 390 Madison Ave. — where L&L is the development and management partner for the site’s owner, Clarion Partners — was to “re-mass” the building so as to make it taller and narrower, but with the same floor area as the old one. Architects KPF are also replacing the gloomy old dark blue curtain wall with transparent glass and spandrels to mark separation of floors.

Just as unrecognizable from the original is 425 Park, where L&L is partners with GreenOak Real Estate and Tokyu Land Corp. Architect Norman Foster devised a dramatic, steel-framed tower with vast windows and outdoor terraces over the avenue.

So far, L&L has only two signed deals are in place, both at 425 Park Ave.

Powerhouse financial firm Citadel took 200,000 square feet, including penthouse floors rented for a record-breaking \$300 per square foot. And four-star Eleven Madison Park restaurateurs Daniel Humm and Will Guidara will launch a two-level, 14,000-square-foot eatery on the tower’s 56th Street corner and side. “We’re having a great deal of fun designing it,” Levinson said.