

## Sky Gardens Add Drama to \$750 Million Park Avenue Tower

BY JAMES S. RUSSELL | DECEMBER 24, 2012 | BLOOMBERG

The office tower proposed for 425 Park Avenue by the London architecture firm Foster & Partners injects some desperately needed life into the Manhattan commercial high-rise.

The \$750 million design features diagonal sinews of steel that suspend blocks of glass-clad floors above two lushly gardened terraces.

Skyscrapers were once the crucible of U.S. architectural and engineering innovation. Nowadays you find towers with urbane forms and innovative engineering in support of evolving work processes mainly in Europe and Asia.

New York tenants wonder why they pay so much for dreary boxes intended for idea-killing cube farms.

The Park Avenue tower rises from a monumental covered plaza to two setbacks, where the 42-foot-high garden levels expose those massive, dramatic building supports. The top two floors of the tower, tentatively planned to rise 49 stories, form a glass-roofed garden. Elevator shafts morph into glowing blades that slice the sky above the roof.

Gardens in skyscrapers aren't just a romantic idea, they are a reflection of the evolving nature of work, according to David Levinson, chairman and CEO of L&L Holding Co. L&L has partnered with Lehman Brothers Holdings Inc.

### Airy Gardens

"People need to work together and collaborate differently," he said.

The airy garden floors -- each with bars, lounges and a rentable mezzanine suspended within -- will host formal meetings and informal gatherings where people can hone new ideas and relationships. Planted outdoor terraces will offer views through nearby skyscrapers.

Levinson, who met me in L&L's light-filled midtown offices wearing a villain's beard and impeccable blue shirt, wants to attract hedge funds and other financial firms comfortable with floors as large as 29,600 square feet or as small as 13,250 square feet.

Foster & Partners offers up the bespoke-suit version of the raw industrial loft that appeals to designers and software geeks. Levinson is after tenants who must collaborate in extraordinarily intense ways, he said.

"It's about how to beat the competition and pursue the deal."

Ceilings are a foot or two higher than the 9-foot standard. Daylight slants farther into the core through high glass walls, a spaciousness that's crucial as companies abandon enclosed offices in favor of meeting rooms and dense, trading-floor hubbub.

### New Zoning

The largest, lower floors reach a spectacular 22 feet in height, thanks to a zoning quirk that rewards the developers for encasing alternate floors of the obsolete 1957 building that today occupies the site.

425 Park reveals potential pitfalls in the new zoning proposed by New York City's Department of City Planning. The plan intends to keep Midtown competitive by promoting larger and more innovative buildings in the blocks extending north and east of Grand Central Terminal.

Buildings could be as much as twice as large as the base zoning permitted today if they offer distinctive, publicly amenable architecture. 425 Park is certainly distinctive. It engages the zoning's aspiration to make more room for pedestrians with a 50-foot-high covered entry plaza, but I fear the space will appeal only on summer's most searing days.

Because of its unusually lofty ceilings, 425 Park will loom much higher over Park Avenue than an older building of the same square footage.

The wide boulevard can handle the behemoth scale, but it will plunge the mid-block deeper into shadow. And that includes some lower, beefier older buildings of high architectural value.

### What Matters

Levinson's tower can't take advantage of the planned zoning because of its 2015 completion, but a qualifying building on its site could rise almost as high as the Chrysler building, according to my calculations.

If they are relatively slim, as 425 Park is, and they are limited in number (as the zoning intends), very tall buildings needn't wreck the scale of the streetscape. However, the street is not all that matters.

Midtown needs more light and fresh air, not less.