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REAL ESTATE

Flights of Fancy and Function

By JANE MARGOLIES FEB. 9, 2018



This limestone and brass staircase at 20 East End Avenue connects the wine cellar below the lobby to a second floor amenity area that includes billiards, a poker room and navy-lacquered library.

Credit Brad Dickson for The New York Times

Mariele Marki lives on the fifth floor of [House 39](#), a new rental building on East 39th Street in Manhattan that is awash in indulgent amenities. The apartment building also has a perfectly nice elevator that stops on all 36 floors. But after walking her dog, Ms. Marki, a marketing consultant who is 26, often takes the stairs to her apartment — starting with the sculptural staircase that spirals up the double-height lobby to the second floor, where she can grab a coffee from the lounge before continuing up on the fire stairs.

“Every little bit helps keep you a little more fit,” she said.

Hammams and wine cellars top many amenity lists for new developments, but staircases? In upscale buildings that go all out to pamper residents, a feature that requires exertion might seem counterintuitive. But over a century and a half after the modern elevator was invented, many developers, architects and designers are bringing staircases to the fore, to add drama, evoke a bygone era, and activate common areas — or activate residents themselves.

And developers are going to considerable lengths to do so.

House 39's spiral, for instance, is 17½-foot tall, and the Canadian company that manufactured it had to trench the floor of its factory to accommodate the height. [Rockwell Group](#), designer of the building's interiors, took inspiration for the form from House 39's curved glass facade, and specified a curved glass balustrade. David Rockwell, the firm's founder — and a self-avowed “stair fan” — is particularly enamored of the staircase's mirror-polished bronze underside, which reflects movement and contributes to what he described as the lobby's dynamism.

Winston Fisher, a partner in [Fisher Brothers](#), the building's developer, said the cost for the set of the steps — about \$1 million — was worth it. “We wanted something cool and artistic and stylish and memorable,” he said.

The architect Robert A.M. Stern, on the other hand, was aiming for the stateliness and intimacy of a historic New York townhouse with the two-story staircase at 20 East End Avenue, a condominium on the Upper East Side developed by [Corigin Real Estate Group](#).



Mariele Marki likes to take the stairs to her fifth-floor apartment on East 39th Street, starting with the sculptural staircase that spirals up the double-height lobby. Credit Brad Dickson for The New York Times

His [namesake firm](#), which designed the building as well as its interiors, wound the staircase — with its limestone treads and brass railing — from the below-lobby wine cellar up to the second floor with its billiards, poker room and navy-lacquered library. Residents can entertain in this club-like area without having to open their private apartments to their guests.

Mr. Stern had additional suggestions for the staircase. “It would be beautiful to have a debutante descend,” he said.

The health benefits of *ascending* stairs, however, have been the impetus for staircases in many buildings today. In 2010 the City of New York released a report titled “[Active Design Guidelines](#)” that includes recommendations for designing staircases that are prominently located — and attractive — to encourage everyday use.

At Tishman Speyer’s [Jackson Park](#) development in Long Island City, Queens, the interiors of the soon-to-open amenities clubhouse are being designed by [Clodagh](#). The clubhouse will have a staircase with windows to bring in natural light and provide views of the complex’s 1.6-acre park, as well as an artist’s mural on the walls, according to Erik Rose, the company’s managing director for residential development.



A rendering of a staircase that will connect the amenity floors at 277 Fifth Avenue. Credit Pentagram

Meanwhile, the staircase designed by Jeffrey Beers International to connect amenity spaces on the third and fourth floors at [277 Fifth Avenue](#), a condominium tower from Victor Group and Lendlease now under construction in the NoMad area of Manhattan, will be decidedly elegant. It will be a free-standing white-plastered coil with a chandelier made of 18 strands of brass-trimmed pendants that dangle down its center. ←

But there are also plans to turn it into a StairMaster of sorts.

Although residents are not slated to begin moving into the 55-story tower until the end of this year, the celebrity trainer [David Kirsch](#) has already created a workout called “5 Minutes on Fifth Ave.” Residents will climb the spiral stairs before going into push-ups, squats and burpees. For those who want more of a challenge, there is “55 Stories on Fifth Ave,” which involves using the fire stairs — a total of 1,021 steps — to reach the building’s top.

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