

The Most Exciting New Buildings in NYC Are Being Built to Show Off This Material

Leading architects—Tadao Ando, Herzog & de Meuron, Foster + Partners—are shunning steel and glass and bringing new meaning to the term "concrete jungle"

TEXT BY [CARLY OLSON](#) · Posted March 22, 2018



A hand-poured concrete staircase at 56 Leonard Street in TriBeCa.

In New York City, many top architects have found inspiration for luxury in a rather humble material: concrete. Several projects popping up on the island have made cement the focus of their façades. It turns out the structural skeleton of a building holds significant visual inspiration—what’s usually reserved for strength and support, hidden behind cladding, is having blending in yet standing out from Manhattan’s architectural landscape, and is flexible enough for

significant customization—a hot commodity for developers in the city’s luxury real estate market.

Architects and developers embracing concrete are distancing their projects from a conventional luxury development building—tall, sleek, and glass. Tadao Ando, the Pritzker Prize–winning architect, is perhaps best known for his works in concrete. His first building in New York, [152 Elizabeth Street](#), is no exception.

Situated on a bustling corner in Lower Manhattan's Nolita neighborhood, pale concrete walls—meticulously smoothed—surround glass windows and iron I-beams. Ando has described these media as “20th-century materials” and believes that together they achieve a structure's ultimate goal: balance. “The concrete component is a critical part of the aesthetic,” says Amit Khurana, cofounder of Sumaida + Khurana, the developer of 152 Elizabeth. “And that's really where you get the richness and duality—by bringing some of the concrete inside.”



Walking into the lobby of 152 Elizabeth.

The building's spare, concrete-clad lobby, complete with a fountain, is designed to transport visitors from the busy city streets to a calming Zen space, which Khurana describes as an “urban sanctuary.” For this welcome departure from a typical luxury development lobby (often an over-the-top display of glitz), the team went minimal, trusting that the concrete could do the talking. Inside the units, columns of the same raw concrete are on display in the living areas.

Other architects agree that concrete should not be relegated to the bones of a building. Ascan Mergenthaler, senior partner at Herzog & de Meuron, explains that for [56 Leonard Street](#)—

the firm's monumental tower in TriBeCa reminiscent of Jenga blocks—explains that this is common in American projects. “We liked the idea of expressing the concrete skeleton of the building and having glass inserts for windows,” he says. “In typical American buildings, concrete will disappear behind cladding, and we thought it was very important to bring it to the foreground.”



Glass, iron, and concrete meet at Tadao Ando's 152 Elizabeth Street building in Nolita.

56 Leonard's interiors show an exceptional dedication to the medium. Concrete columns add character to units, concrete walls and ceilings dominate the building's common areas, and a spiral staircase of entirely hand-poured concrete packs a sculptural punch.

A few blocks away, at [30 Warren Street](#), a 23-unit condo designed by Post-Office Architectes, a similar reverence for the material is taking form. François Leininger, a partner at the firm, interestingly describes the structure as a glass building sheathed in a corrugated, concrete skin. “We wanted the skin or the cladding to be like a veil, meaning that it would look almost like a single element going across the whole façade,” he says. This “veil,” which is interrupted by large-scale windows, is paramount to creating

privacy for the residences on a busy corner of TriBeCa.

At [100 East 53rd Street](#), the Foster + Partners–designed tower in Midtown Manhattan, using concrete inside certain units helps set them apart, from a marketing perspective. The building offers two types of units: “loft residences” on floors five through nine—open-floor plan spaces designed for art collectors—and “tower residences”—more-conventional units soaring up to 61 floors. Floor plans aside, both have a decidedly unique vibe catered to a different type of resident. In the “loft residences,” nearly ten-foot-high walls are coated in concrete, in addition to the ceilings, which have built-in tracks for custom art lighting. Polished concrete floors, stainless steel kitchen appliances, and oak cabinets and doors complete the look.



An art-filled loft residence at Foster + Partners's 100 East 53rd Street.

Peter Han, a partner at Foster + Partners, says that these materials intend to give residents a more *de rigueur* downtown vibe. “The loft residents are inspired by New York’s downtown industrial loft–style living with art gallery–type spaces and finishes,” he says. “We wanted to celebrate the use of concrete in the building, making it an integral part of the building’s aesthetic.”

Concrete also allows for a myriad of customization options, which makes it a versatile fit for many projects. At 30 Warren, Leininger raves about the material’s pliability—his firm created a thin, textured veil with a dense mixture of concrete. “We selected a specific concrete brand for its ability to be cast in very large sheets that would have minimal thickness,” he

says, “and there’s a lot of freedom to create a texture.” And these sheets don’t have to be in the typical rectangles of other types of cladding. 30 Warren’s veil is made of L- and T-shaped pieces that fit snugly around the windows.



Long pieces of L-shaped concrete cladding will form the exterior of 30 Warren.

However, the material can often be tricky to get just right. At 152 Elizabeth, Ando’s expertise with concrete doesn’t mean that assembly is easy. To achieve his signature smooth sheets with minimal air pockets, a whole team has to be at the ready. “We had to consider air content, temperature, and working time because those are all critical components when we place the concrete on site,” says Saif Sumaida, Khurana’s partner and cofounder. “We rejected more concrete trucks than we actually placed.” Khurana adds, “We had eight independent parties at each pour between consultants and each team. It was all about quality control.” Once the molds—which are plywood covered in plastic—are filled, there is no room to fix a slab after a pour. Khurana and Sumaida defer much credit to the site superintendent and project manager.

Despite the often finicky nature of concrete, all architects agree that the final effect is ideal for building in NYC’s landscape. Of 152 Elizabeth, Khurana says, “In relation to the urban-industrial quality of the neighborhood, concrete became a natural fit.” Leininger explains that the concrete exterior of 30 Warren holds its own in a sea of iconic towers, including the World Trade Center. “We wanted to create a building that would fit right in the middle of TriBeCa that’s fairly modest

in size, would reflect this sort of modernity, but would also be a fairly domestic and homey place,” he says, describing it as an “inverted belvedere”—something that people in the surrounding skyscrapers can look down on and enjoy. Mergenthaler explains that 56 Leonard’s concrete pillared base, which is far more modest than its block-like body, is designed to fit into TriBeCa’s existing architectural landscape. “It’s rooted in the neighborhood for the immediate people moving around the building,” he says.

Adds Mergenthaler, “It’s not a wallpaper, it’s not a thin material—it really has a physical presence.”