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ARCHITECTURE

A Place To Hang Your Hirst



THE TATE CHELSEA
The Tate Building,
at 535 W. 23rd
Street.

By JAMES GARDNER

At the risk of sounding self-absorbed, I can never forgive the art world for moving to Chelsea. How much simpler things seemed when East Siders like myself had only to take the Lexington Avenue line down to SoHo. Now we have to head to the Far West Side, where we step through oil slicks and negotiate construction sheds, auto-repair shops, and on-coming 12-wheelers, lest we appear to be out of the loop with regard to the present and future state of Western art.

One solution is simply to move there. This suggestion, however disagreeable it may sound, has at least the virtue of no longer being inconceivable. A wealth of new building has been undertaken by developers who are confident that the culturally insecure will pay top-dollar to be within sniffing distance of artists and their galleries.

So what if there is no food to be had for half a mile in any direction? So what if there is no bookstore, hardware store, or pharmacy? Who needs those when, on one and the same block, you can purchase a Damien Hirst and a new set of tires?

Among the newer options available for those who would colonize the Far West Side is a building, at 535 W. 23rd, that calls itself, obnoxiously, the Tate. I can assure you it is not named for the Tate Britain, with its portraits by Sir Godfrey Kneller and dog paintings by

Sir Edwin Landseer.

No, it is surely named for the Tate Modern, and the Young British Artists who exhibit there and who, at least for the next two seasons, will remain as "cutting edge" as they have been for the last two.

This 14-story building, developed by the Related Companies and designed by the Rockwell Group, rents apartments for as much as \$10,000 a month. What seems somewhat peculiar about this mid-block building, in the context of the neighborhood, is that it stretches all the way from 23rd to 24th Street between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues. Thus it has not one, but two façades, the slightly better one being on the 23rd Street side.

Though you may be paying for the designer, however, you will not be paying for the design, which is decidedly lackluster. Along 24th Street, the brick base rises in three parts. Behind them is a set-back curtain wall of grayish glass and metal infill that descends into the interstices of the three brick segments. The 23rd Street façade reads like a scramble of these same elements, without even the benefit of regularity.

The only thing vaguely challenging in the design is a glass canopy, attached to the building by an industrial-strength I-beam that does not sort well with the rest of the structure. Meanwhile, the lobby seems unduly small for so large a building, and it is

not helped by the clashing abundance of woods and rock textures that represent David Rockwell at his most arbitrary and unrestrained.

What looks to be a far better building is rising immediately to the west of the Tate. Like the Tate, 555 W. 23rd Street stretches all the way through to 24th. Undertaken by Douglaston Development, it was designed by Stephen B. Jacobs, who distinguished himself most recently at the Hotel Gansevoort, in the Meatpacking District half a mile to the south.

This latest project, a 14-story high-rise that will contain 337 luxury apartments, has been appareled in luscious lobster-red brick that looks as lovely as brick can look, especially if you see it in the dying rays of the late December sun. Superficially, this is a far simpler building than the Tate. Its aesthetic force comes from its flat and bulky massing and from the way it fully and unapologetically occupies its site.

In the same spirit, its deep-punched windows dramatically enhance the aggressive flatness of the façade and recall the century-old mercantile architecture that is the most conspicuous feature of the area. The bays that divide the windows, alternately two and three panes wide, are relieved by subtle markings in white stone, and they converge on the center of the building in a slightly pyramidal configuration. At the resulting summit, in one of the few nods

to postmodernism, four bays assert themselves above the others and are perforated so that blue sky shows through.

Though it is too early to tell, the two-story entrance looks as though it will be as imposing as the rest of the building.

This building looks to be substantially complete. The same can not be said for the boxy structure that is going up on Tenth Avenue and 24th. Designed by Garrett Gourley Architects, it comes with a name that, by the standards of Manhattan residential real estate, is unusually hip: "Vesta 24."

Though any assessment at this point is merely provisional, I must say that it seems positively to revel in its spirited ugliness. The cladding looks as if it had been carved out of Formica and faux-wood finish, such that you can practically smell the plastic. The armature to which it has been applied has cultivated a goofy heaviness and a rectilinearity so sharp you could almost cut yourself on it.

Just to give you an idea of what a strange area this is, Vesta 24 is being built next to a gas station, which would ordinarily spell death for a developer. But the Vesta Group has wagered — shrewdly, I think — that this note of Hopperesque authenticity will seem absolutely "priceless" to its Eurotrash and Europhile clientele, who apparently go in for that sort of thing.

jgardner@nysun.com