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Quiet in Your Home Is a True Luxury, Says Macklowe's Director of Architecture

Lilla Smith, who heads design for one of New York's biggest developers, talks about One Wall Street, converting a 90-year-old building and her influences



Developer Harry Macklowe recently unveiled one of [Manhattan](#)'s latest trophy residential buildings, One Wall Street—and by his side has been Lilla Smith, director of architecture and design at Macklowe Properties, who oversaw nearly every aspect of the \$1.5 billion conversion from a landmark Ralph Walker office tower to 565 [condo](#) units.

A 12-year veteran of the company, Ms. Smith has also guided design for Macklowe's 432 Park Ave., 737 Park Ave. and 150 East 72nd St. luxury-condo projects. Until 2009, Smith was a senior associate at New York's Gwathmey Siegel & Associates, planning and designing residential and commercial projects.

Ms. Smith, who lives in Brooklyn Heights with her family, talked to Mansion Global about steering the largest office-to-condo conversion in New York history, why materials matter and why quiet is the new luxury.

Mansion Global: One Wall Street was Macklowe's largest residential project in New York. How challenging was it to design?

Lilla Smith: One Wall Street is massive. I'd never encountered a project of this scale. I came from a practice with Charles Gwathmey, where we'd done campus academic buildings and libraries, but the residential projects were predominantly private homes. One Wall has 190 different layouts. Managing that and getting your head around it was daunting. Harry and I approached it as creative private, one-off residences. There are bathrooms and kitchen designs that no one in their right mind would execute on a multi-family scale.

MG: On a project this big, were you able to stay involved in the details?

LS: I was in the weeds of everything. With a consultant, I came up with the mix of apartments and amenities, then the actual layouts. Once we created those spaces, it continued on to the development of details in bathrooms and kitchens. There were site visits around the world to select and source materials. With the team, I also visited New York City shops doing fabrications. For a developer like Macklowe to have an architect on staff, getting into these weeds, is highly unusual.

MG: What are some of the more memorable materials you used?

LS: The travertine we used for bathrooms was sourced from Tivoli outside Rome, from the same place Bernini sourced for the St. Peter's colonnade. You can't find anything more timeless than that. Our Bianco Dolomite marble came from Turkey. Our supplier bought a warehouse so we could see the consistency of veining on a white background. We sourced fluted glass from the Czech Republic and wood for the lobby paneling from Africa. But we also got to oversee much of the fabrication in local shops. The fluted-glass tiered chandelier in the lobby was put together in Ronkonkoma. The mosaics in our pool were made in Italy, and we used people who've been in the tile trade in New York for 50 years.

MG: Did the pandemic lead you to make any major changes at One Wall Street?

LS: We were pretty much all bought by March 2020, so there were no significant changes. But we did have second thoughts about secondary bathrooms, which had been planned in a stone material. The user of a secondary bathroom may not be the most conscientious user. So we went with porcelain, which is basically indestructible. It's popular now, and there's a bit of a green aspect to it. It's much more sophisticated than it used to be.

MG: At the luxury end, what are buyers seeking in terms of materials?

LS: There's a warmth and a casualness people want now. Opulence is not it. Leather has to feel natural, for example. Stone has to have a sensual quality to it.

MG: What does the luxury buyer expect from kitchens, and how do you design them?

LS: Understanding the practical needs of a kitchen and the importance of how the appliances, sink, cutlery and utensil drawers, and cabinet storage are laid out to have the appropriate adjacencies is paramount to its success. Having personally used kitchens daily in my own homes, from a studio-size initially to a four-bedroom now, has been an important part of the learning process and informs the design for the various-sized apartments at One Wall Street.

The preferred location of the kitchen within a home has also changed. What was once considered a luxury in New York City, having the kitchen remotely located within the apartment, often with a separate entry off the service elevator hallway and staffed perhaps by help, has evolved to centrally locating the kitchen within the home, working as a gathering place for friends and family. Having good company in your kitchen is a true luxury.

MG: Which architect was your biggest inspiration or influence?

LS: Experiencing Louis Kahn's buildings was the best education as a student. Starting at age 15, getting to work in the Exeter Library, while I was taking a summer architectural course, and later in graduate school, to visit and explore the Yale Art Gallery and British Arts Center in New Haven, was intellectually stimulating. Studying his use of simple geometric forms that produced monumental readings, the use of daylight, the hierarchy of spaces and the integration of natural materials of concrete, brick, stone, zinc and teak provided an important architectural foundation for me. There's a beauty and integrity to the forms, a truth in the use of natural materials and a tranquility in the spaces that courses through Kahn's architecture that is timeless and inspiring.

MG: Is there a common thread in the luxury residential buildings you design?

LS: I'd say it's a clean modernism, and being truthful about materials. I try to be truthful about how those materials intersect, and what they reveal between them. We also pride ourselves as architects on quality design that pays attention to proportion, the scale of rooms, and employing light.

MG: With One Wall Street, you converted a building that was more than 90 years old. How much did that complicate the project?

LS: The adaptive reuse was worth it, but it was much more challenging than a new build. You always get surprises. There are things buried in the walls. You're constantly needing to make adjustments. We had to demolish 30 elevators, escalators and stairs, and reconfigure everything for the best light and air in the apartments. But from a sustainability perspective, it was important.

MG: What's your definition of luxury?

LS: Luxury in architecture is the thoughtful making of spaces. You're trained in the classic lessons of proportion, scale and making things align. It's how materials come together, the quality of construction, the quality of light. Masterful use of light is a luxury, and how you manipulate that... One Wall Street is also incredibly quiet. Everybody makes that comment about the units. Solitude in your apartment is a real luxury.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.