

44 Mercer a success due to sober design, skillful construction

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By [James Gardner](#)

Right next to the famed [40 Mercer Street](#), which was designed by [Jean Nouvel](#) and developed by Andre Balazs, a newer, smaller structure has just shot up and it is all but complete. At 14,000 square feet, the mere sliver of a building that rises seven stories and occupies a single lot, [44 Mercer Street](#) is, together with its neighbor to the south, one of the rare intrusions of modernity among the aging piles of the cast-iron district.

This new Soho building between Broome and Grand streets was designed by Caterina Roiatti of TRA Studio. Roiatti's firm also designed 72 Mercer Street, a slightly more contextual building than the latest arrival. In its neo-modernist probity, the new building is worthy to stand beside Jean Nouvel's, which is separated from it by a narrow courtyard that belongs to the Nouvel building and that stands over a discretely covered underground parking facility.

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A rendering of the 44 Mercer Street building

Forty-four Mercer is not as modern or as rigorously angular as its Nouvel neighbor. Through an agreement with the Landmarks Preservation Commission, the façade of the new building's ground floor is divided into three iron bays that forcefully recall the functionalist vocabulary of most of the surrounding buildings. But starting at the second floor, the building's idiom becomes much more contemporary, a complicated affair of six high-ceilinged apartments glazed over with an expansive mullioned curtainwall, whose mid-section curves gently as it protrudes from the rest of the facade. The building as a whole is framed by a gray metal surround that gives the structure its dominant color. Along the south side, a few windows interrupt an extensive brick wall, while the back becomes fully metallic, each floor equipped with a charming balcony of metal and mesh.

Above all else, perhaps, the chief charm of 44 Mercer is that it has not only been well designed but also well made. A project like Philip Johnson/Alan Ritchie's so-called Urban Glass House at 330 Spring Street is elegantly conceived, but its execution is so palpably mediocre that it severely diminishes the overall effect of the building. At 44 Mercer, exactly the opposite is true: our appreciation of its sober and elegant design is enhanced by our sense of the skill with which it has been assembled.

James Gardner, formerly the architecture critic of the New York Sun, writes on the visual arts for several publications.